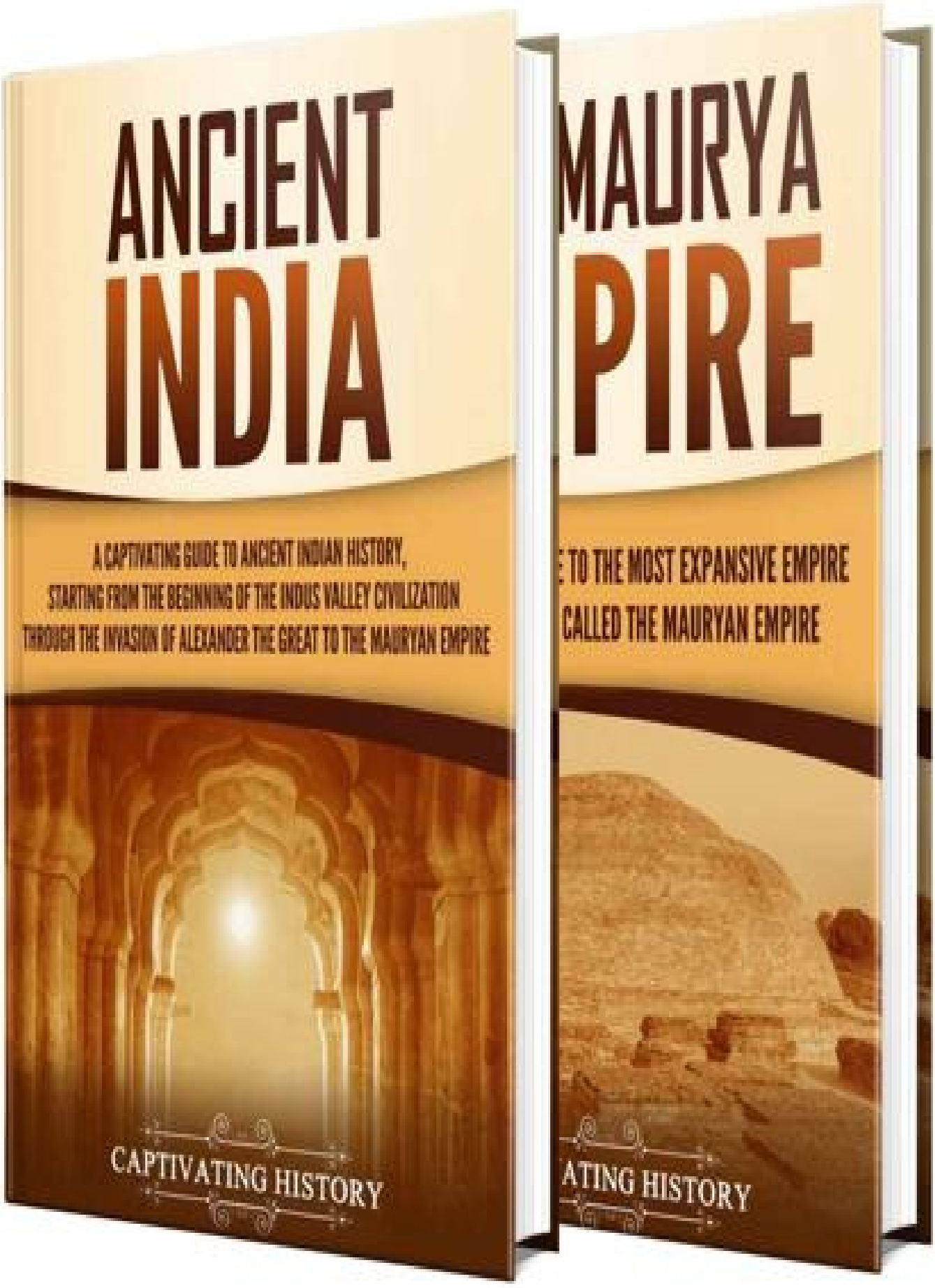
ANCIENT
INDIA
A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY,
STARTING FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION
THROUGH THE INVASION OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT TO THE MAURYAN EMPIRE
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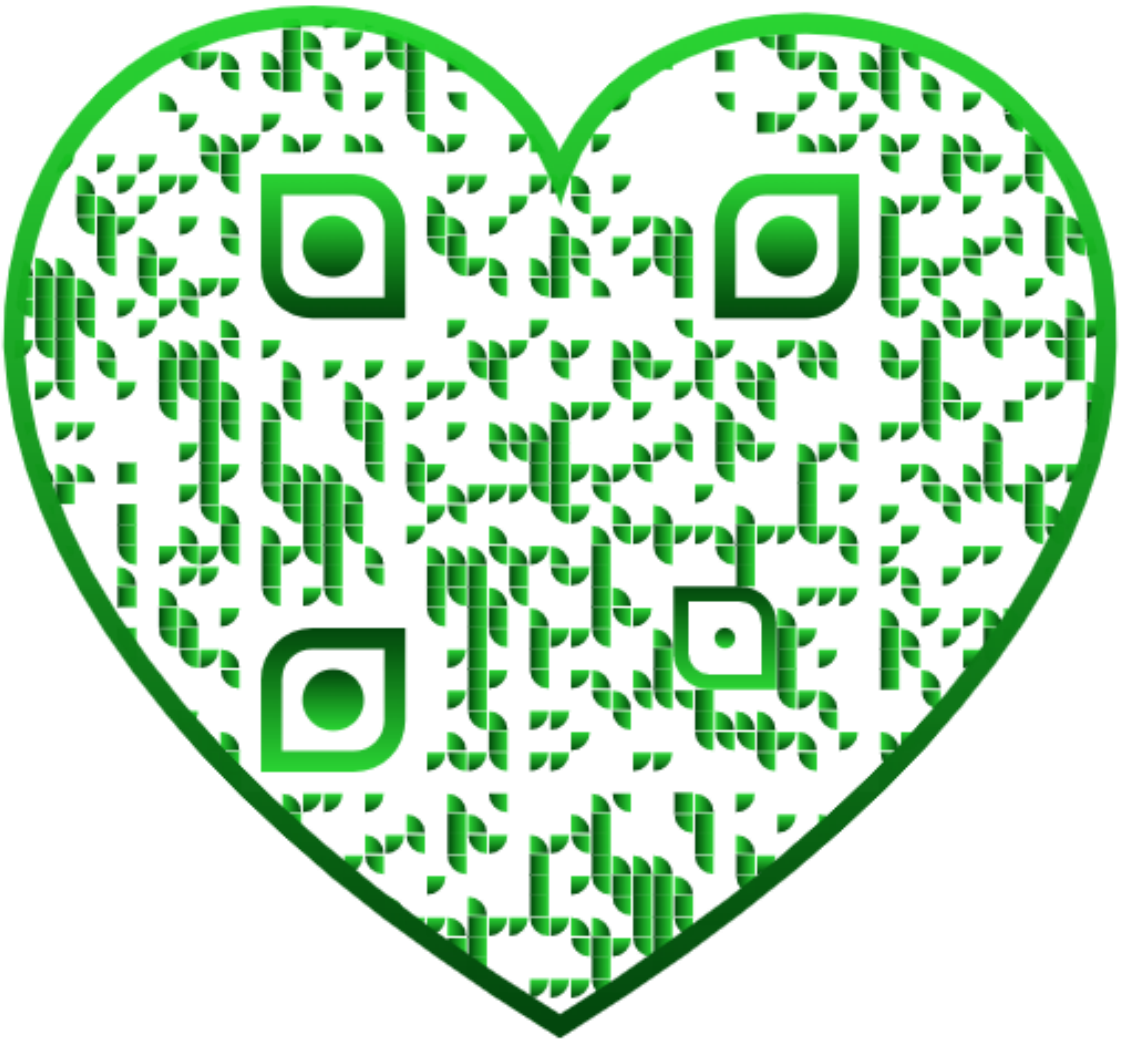

History of Ancient India

A Captivating Guide to Ancient Indian History and the Maurya Empire

Table of Contents

Part 1: Ancient India
Introduction
Chapter 1 – The Birth of a Great Civilization in the Fertile Indus Valley
Chapter 2 – The Three Periods of Harappan Civilization
Chapter 3 – The Iron Age in the Indus Valley: The Succession of Harappan
Chapter 4 – The Demise of the Kuru Kingdom and the Shift of Power in Ancient India
Chapter 5 – Between the Empires of Ancient India
Chapter 6 – The Invasion of Alexander the Great: The Aftermath of the Pan-Hellenic War
Chapter 7 – The Rise of the Maurya Empire
Chapter 8 – The Maurya Dynasty and Life in the Maurya Empire
Chapter 9 – Life in Ancient India: The People of India from the Indus Valley Civilization to the Maurya Empire
Chapter 10 – The Cultural Legacy of Ancient India: Art, Architecture, and Religion
Conclusion
Part 2: The Maurya Empire
Introduction
Chapter 1 – Ancient India before Maurya
Chapter 2 – Rise of the Mauryan Empire
Chapter 3 – The Greco-Roman Affiliation
Chapter 4 – Growth of the Empire
Chapter 5 – Imperial Unity under Ashoka the Great
Chapter 6 – Consolidation of Maurya: The Edicts of Ashoka
Chapter 7 – The Weakened Empire
Chapter 8 – Fall of the Mauryan Kingdom: The Shunga Coup
Chapter 9 – The Remnants of Maurya
Conclusion
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References

Introduction

Ancient India was home to one of the oldest civilizations in the world: the Indus Valley civilization. But how did the Indian culture come to be?

Dive into the world of one of the first civilizations, and follow the rise of ancient India from Harappa and the first wave of urbanization to the first monarchial dynasty of Kuru. Discover how Buddha went from being a wealthy prince to one of the greatest and most appreciated religious figures in the history of spiritualism. Find out why Alexander the Great fell in love with India and how he was prevented from becoming the king of the world. You will learn why Ashoka the Great was the greatest king in the history of India and how his grandfather Chandragupta formed the biggest empire in the world.

And amidst the battles for dominion over the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Indus River, you will read about how the common people of ancient India lived. What did a day in the life of an average Mauryan look like? What did people of ancient India eat, how did they dress, and what did they believe?

Find all these answers and more in *Ancient India**:** A Captivating Guide to Ancient Indian History, Starting from the Beginning of the Indus Valley Civilization Through the Invasion of Alexander the Great to the Mauryan Empire*!

Chapter 1 – The Birth of a Great Civilization in the Fertile Indus Valley

A powerful and advanced civilization rose from the banks of the Indus River, by which India was named. The Indus Valley civilization emerged alongside some of the greatest ancient civilizations, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Before excavations commenced, archaeologists believed that the Indus Valley civilization bloomed in the valley of the river Ganges and that it began with Aryan immigrants who came from central Asia and Persia around 1250 BCE. After finding new evidence with more excavations, historians and scholars could move the timeline to between 1800 and 1500 BCE, providing new context for the Indus Valley and the significance of the Indus River for the general development and evolution of the civilization that would become known as Harappan.

In the 19th century, India and the surrounding countries in the Indus Valley were all colonized by the British Empire. In 1856, British officials oversaw the construction of a railway, which was supposed to connect Karachi and Lahore, two cities located within the borders of modern-day Pakistan. As the construction went on, laborers kept finding old bricks that were baked in fires many years ago. The bricks were lodged as if someone had purposefully placed them there, and while the laborers used some of these bricks in the construction of the railway, it was soon evident that they were using priceless pieces of ancient history.

At first, archaeologists thought that the bricks belonged to the Maurya civilization. The Maurya Empire dominated the Indus Valley from around 322 BCE to 185 BCE. However, these fire-baked bricks were discovered to be much older. They had discovered the ancient city of Harappa.

One year after Harappa was discovered in Punjab, Mohenjo-daro was discovered in the northern province of Sindh in modern-day Pakistan. Translated, Mohenjo-daro means “the mound of the dead,” although this meaning is often reputed. Some scholars believe that by the time Mohenjo-daro had become one of the two biggest centers of power, which was between 2500 and 1700 BCE, Harappa had already met its decline. Some even think that Harappa just succeeded Mohenjo-daro, hinting that the two main centers weren’t contemporary. However, much of the evidence shows that they coexisted.

Further research and excavations led scholars to discover the ancient site of Mehrgarh. Mehrgarh is located in modern-day Pakistan in the Kacchi Plain in Balochistan, and it was first discovered by archaeologists in 1974. These excavations were completed by French archaeologists Jean-François Jarrige and Catherine Jarrige. This husband-and-wife duo provided scholars with evidence of a civilized ancient world that dates back to 7000 BCE. This revelation changed the

way the Indus Valley civilization was perceived in terms of its development and significance in the ancient world.

And so, the very beginning of the Indus Valley civilization was discovered, and scholars were now able to start piecing together the picture of this ancient civilization.

The Beginning of the Indus Valley Civilization

The earliest evidence of the Indus Valley civilization dates back to 7000 BCE. As mentioned above, it was found in the Neolithic settlement of Mehrgarh, located to the west of the Indus Valley. The evidence shows that Mehrgarh was once a small farming village that was formed around 7000 BCE and thrived until 5500 BCE.

Around 7000 BCE, the Indus Valley civilization didn't use irrigation. Later on, the Indus people took up irrigation; it is presumed that their irrigation system was copied from the one used in Mesopotamia, as the two civilizations began trading with each other. There is also evidence that the settlement of Mehrgarh cultivated domesticated cotton around 5000 BCE.

The early Indus people relied on several types of wheat and barley. It is actually believed that barley was originally brought from Mesopotamia. Besides barley and wheat, people ate black gram (a kind of bean), mung beans, and pigeon peas. They also depended on sheep and goats. But even though the people had domesticated goats and sheep, the population relied on hunting. A great number of gazelle bones testify to this.

In the first stage of the Neolithic period in Mehrgarh, there were no ceramic tools. Instead, the people relied on wooden and stone tools, which mostly included knives made of stone with wooden handles. Excavations also revealed a limited number of ground stone axes.

Human burials showed signs of civilization in the second stage of the Neolithic period, which commenced around 5000 BCE. People were buried with necklaces that were made of stone beads or shells, and they would often be accompanied by baskets that were likely packed with food for the deceased. The burial tradition included sacrificing a young goat or sheep that would be buried together with the human remains.

While the people of the Indus Valley mostly built houses with mud bricks, a new type of building appeared during the transition from the first to the second stage of the Neolithic period. Small buildings, which were most likely used as granaries, became a common structure in the Indus Valley, indicating that the area went through improvements in agriculture as well as in architecture. The appearance of granaries was closely related to the use of irrigation, and the fact that there was a growing number of granaries at the beginning of the second stage of the Neolithic period indicates that the inhabitants often had a surplus in grain. Around 5000 BCE, a tectonic movement formed large quantities of silt, which created more fertile farmland.

There were some changes in domesticating animals around this time. People started to keep a humped variety of bovines known as zebu, which soon became more

important and more common than goats and sheep. Later into the second stage, Mehrgarh people domesticated rice and made a greater number of tools, often using seashells and semiprecious stones. The use of stones, such as lapis lazuli and turquoise, indicate the beginning of trade with other civilizations, possibly Mesopotamia and surrounding settlements along the coast and in Central Asia. Pottery also became widely used in the second stage, and burials became more elaborate. People were now buried in pits that would be walled with mud bricks. The human remains would often be placed in these funerary chambers with clay figurines of a female. This figurine was most likely a primitive deity, possibly something similar to a Mother Earth figure.

Archeologists have also found remnants of tall brick walls, which may indicate that the people of Mehrgarh started to build monumental structures. The first use of ivory and copper is also noted in this period, while the growing population surely indicates that the Indus Valley civilization was booming. Mehrgarh wasn't the only settlement in the Indus Valley that showed such progress and advancement, although it was among the first settlements in the valley.

The transformation of the Indus Valley civilization is astounding. It started as a small settlement in Mehrgarh around 7000 BCE, and over time, the agricultural village evolved into a major civilization with two major cities—Harappa and Mohenjo-daro—and over a hundred smaller villages and settlements. These settlements could have been a part of the centralized governance of this area, something that was most likely first established in Harappa.

Chapter 2 – The Three Periods of Harappan Civilization

Harappa was a village in modern-day Punjab, Pakistan, west of the Ravi River in the Indus Valley. The Ravi River has since changed course, and it is now located to the north of the site.

The Harappan civilization, another name for the Indus Valley civilization, is periodically divided into three periods: Early Harappan (3300 BCE–2600 BCE), Mature Harappan (2600 BCE–1900 BCE, and Late Harappan (1900 BCE–1300 BCE). These divisions were created by scholars to differentiate the cultural, religious, social, and political development of the Harappan civilization.

What makes the Early Harappa period interesting to scholars is the appearance of what may be the first form of the Indus script. Clay tablets have been found that date from between 3300 BCE and 3200 BCE. The tablets contain trident-shaped and plant-like formations, which remind scholars of the Indus script.

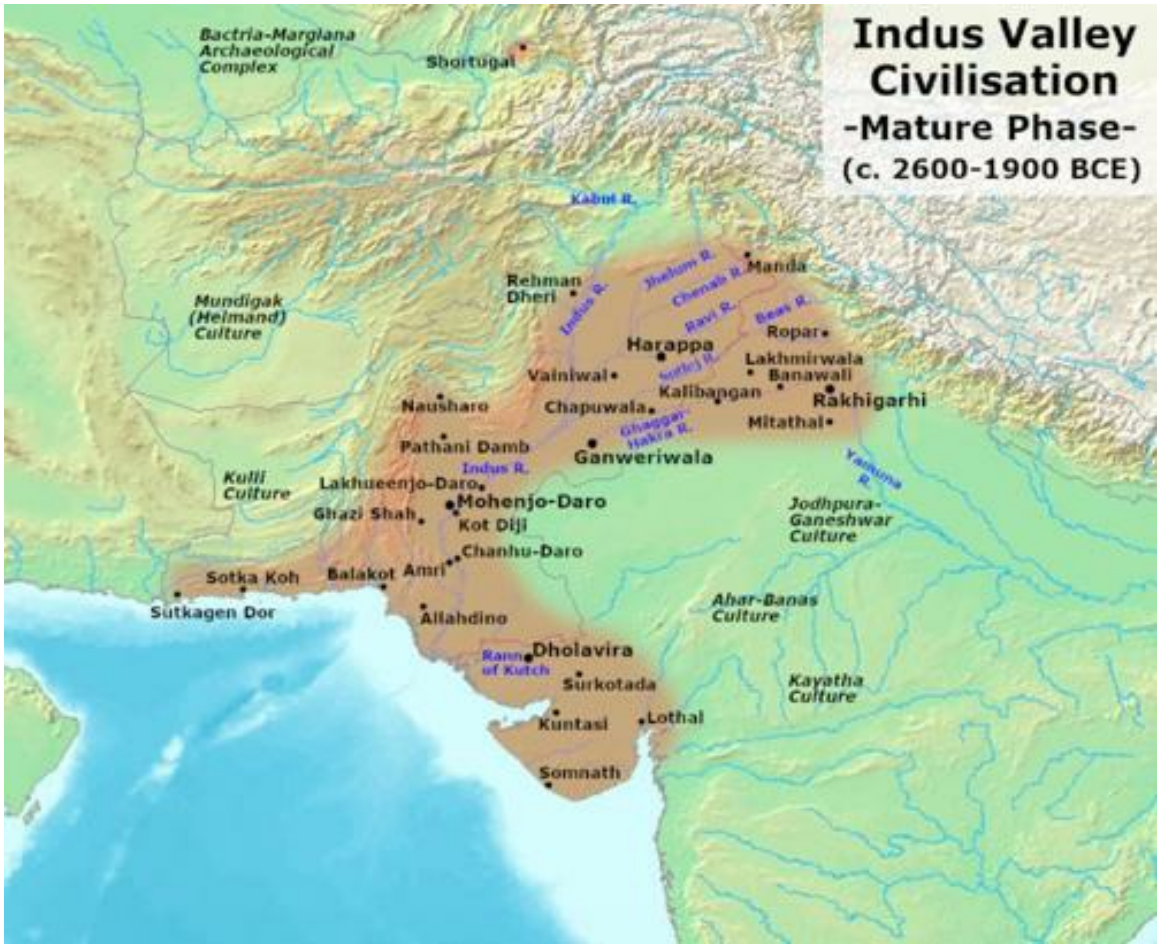
During the first stage of the Early Harappan period, the Harappan people lived as farmers in the mountains. They would later descend into the valleys and continue with their agricultural practices and domestication of animals. The surrounding villages developed simultaneously with Harappa, later merging due to urbanization. At the end of the Early Harappan period, Harappa started to build walls around the city. There was more elaborate architecture, as well as and well-established trading routes and connections. By this time, the people of Harappa had domesticated the water buffalo and cultivated crops like peas, dates, and sesame seeds. Rice and cotton were also in use and domesticated.

During the transition between the Early and Mature periods, Harappan villages turned into urbanized cities, and their material culture started to develop, as scholars have discovered elaborate pottery styles and details from this period. What signifies the transition between the Early period and the Mature one is the appearance of stamp seals with the Indus script, which began to take its final form in 2600 (scholars date the fully developed Indus script to between 2600 and 1900 BCE).

By the end of the Early Harappan and the beginning of the Mature period, the people of the Indus Valley had already learned how to control the floods and use them in their favor. Instead of being washed away, the people would enjoy a surplus in crops and grain. Aside from Harappa by the Ravi River, archaeologists have found over 1,050 urban cities in the area of the Ganges dating from the Mature Harappan period.

With the Mature Harappan period, urbanization and urban planning across the valley took place, indicating the Indus Valley civilization’s development. Granaries became more sophisticated and larger, with a separate room for pounding grain and making flour. There was also a distinct difference between homes, as some of these

houses were more luxurious than others, which indicates that social classes had begun to form. The use of the first ancient urban sanitation systems is also noted; the people of the Indus Valley used hydraulic engineering to ensure clean water and proper sanitation. These systems are the first examples of urbanized sanitation in the ancient world.



Mature Harappan period (2600–1900 BC). Credit: McIntosh, Jane (2008). The Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives.

Sophisticated drainage and reservoir systems ran across and underneath the city, with house drainages being connected to the city's main drainage system. Reservoir supplies were used for supplying the public and private baths. Judging by the elaborate water and drainage systems, the Indus Valley civilization placed a major emphasis on hygiene. The houses in the valley got drinking water from numerous wells dug around the wider location of Harappa and its surrounding urban centers. One well could have been used by a group of houses.

Even the smallest of houses had courtyards or smaller lanes leading to the entrance of the house. Aside from brick homes, the Indus people built tall brick walls that

were most likely used to block incoming floods and neutralize the destructive effects that monsoons could inflict. The Mature Harappan period also saw new building structures, such as dockyards, warehouses, and brick platforms. One of the most exceptional buildings that have been found is the Great Bath, which was discovered in Mohenjo-daro.

The Great Bath in Mohenjo-daro, excavated in 1926. Credit: M. Imran, Wikimedia Commons.

The Great Bath is located on a mound that is known as the "citadel" and is estimated to have been built around the 3rd millennium BCE. It is known as the oldest example of a public water tank. The bath had two staircases, which led to two separate entrances into the bathhouse (one from the north, the other from the south). Along the eastern side of the bath, there is a series of rooms that stretch across the complex. Some of these rooms were probably used to supply the water tank, while one of them has a well.

It is unlikely that a building of such magnificence and space was used only as an everyday public bathhouse. Scholars believe that the Great Bath might have been used for religious purposes. After all, water is a symbol of purification in many cultures, and if that was the case here, this means that the purpose of the Great Bath was to purify and cleanse the bathers spiritually.

If one crossed the street from the Great Bath, one would find another massive building with two floors and several rooms. Scholars have compared the size of the Great Bath to the building across the street, as well as the proximity of the building.

Many presume that this building used to house priests.

Although there was a priest class, most of the people living in the urban centers of the Indus Valley were either craftsmen, artisans, or traders. Highly valued tin-glazed beads and different ornamented vestiges have been found in excavations, testifying to trade networks across the wider area in the Indus Valley and outside in Central Asia.

When it comes to societal classifications, it seems that there was no distinct concentration of wealth in certain areas of the cities, as all the houses had the same access to wells and water supplies. However, the difference in the sizes of the houses proves that some people were wealthier than others.

Culture, Governance, Art, and Life in the Mature Harappan Period

Scholars can’t find any evidence of an ultimate leader or powerful ruler or even the existence of a monarchy and hereditary power over a single political body in the Mature Harappan period. What is certain is that there was some sort of governance in place. It was most likely centralized or divided among the major urban centers, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. People used standardized weights across the entire Indus Valley, and the cities in the valley resembled each other, which indicates that these cities might have been under centralized governance.

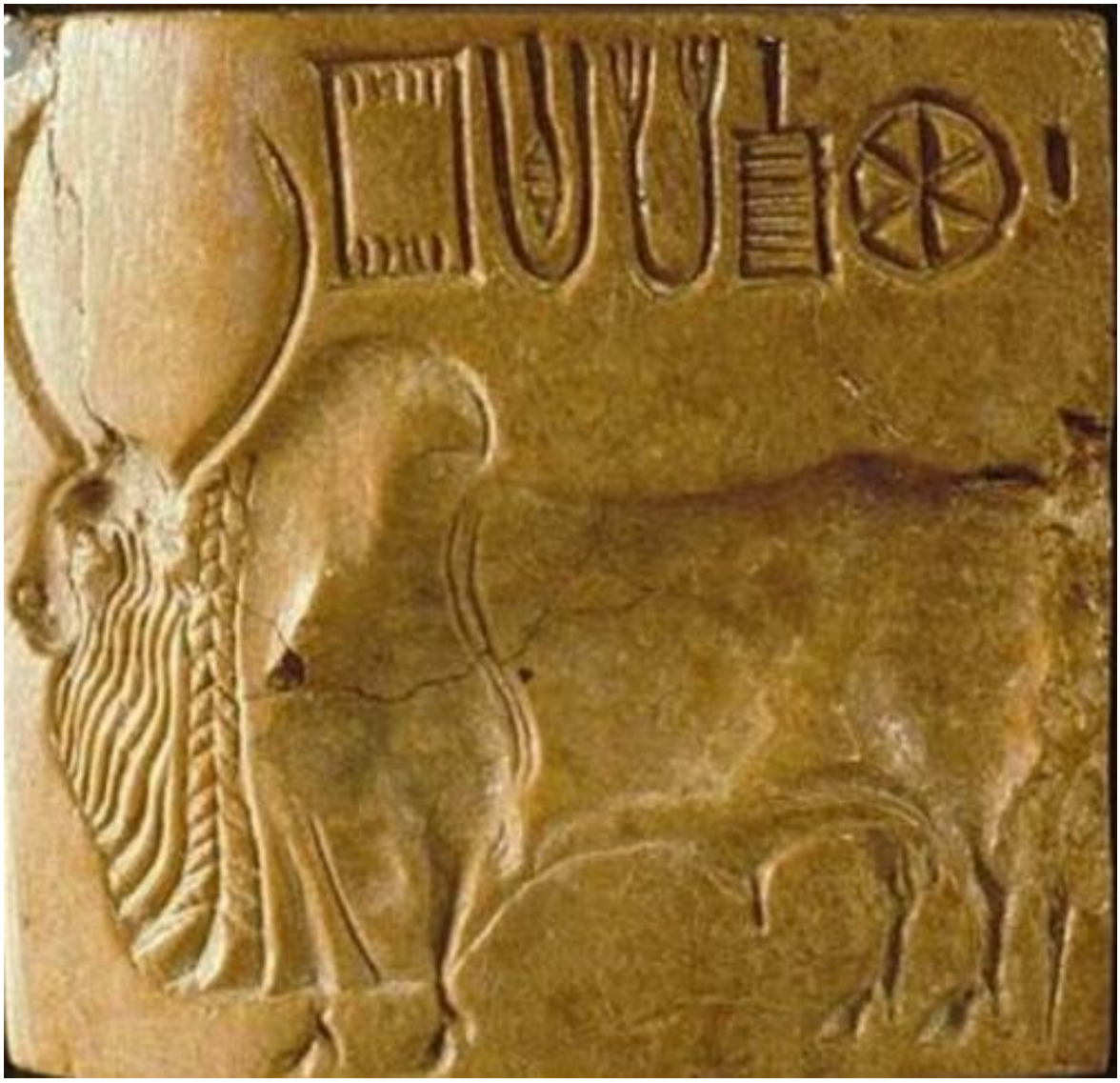
Scholars suggest that there were no distinctive social classes during the Mature Harappan period and that all citizens had equal rights and probably equal or nearly equal wealth. Similar vestiges found across the Indus Valley during this period, such as pottery, stamps, grid patterns for urbanization, brick sizes, building styles, symbols, statuettes, and the method of burial, all indicate that the over 1,050 cities of the valley were under a single government. The people of the Indus Valley most likely had their own rulers or government officials, but the area also might have been ruled by religious leaders as well. However, it is not known how these leaders might have been chosen or the extent of their power.

Since religion must have been an important part of the Indus Valley civilization, it is presumed that the region was ruled by priests who also had the role of gurus or teachers. They taught religion to young boys and girls from the age of five. Those same boys and girls enjoyed toys that were probably made by their parents; as stated above, most people in the urban centers were either artisans, craftsmen, or traders. The discovery of dice with dots that signify numbers indicates that adults also played games.

The surplus in grain and crops, thanks to the irrigation systems in place, provided the Indus Valley civilization with everything it needed to develop. That is how the people in this area were among the first in the ancient world to be able to accurately measure time, mass, and length. Besides being one of the first to come up with standardized weights, the Indus people used touchstones, small slate tablets, to test gold and its purity. They also introduced some novel techniques in metallurgy.

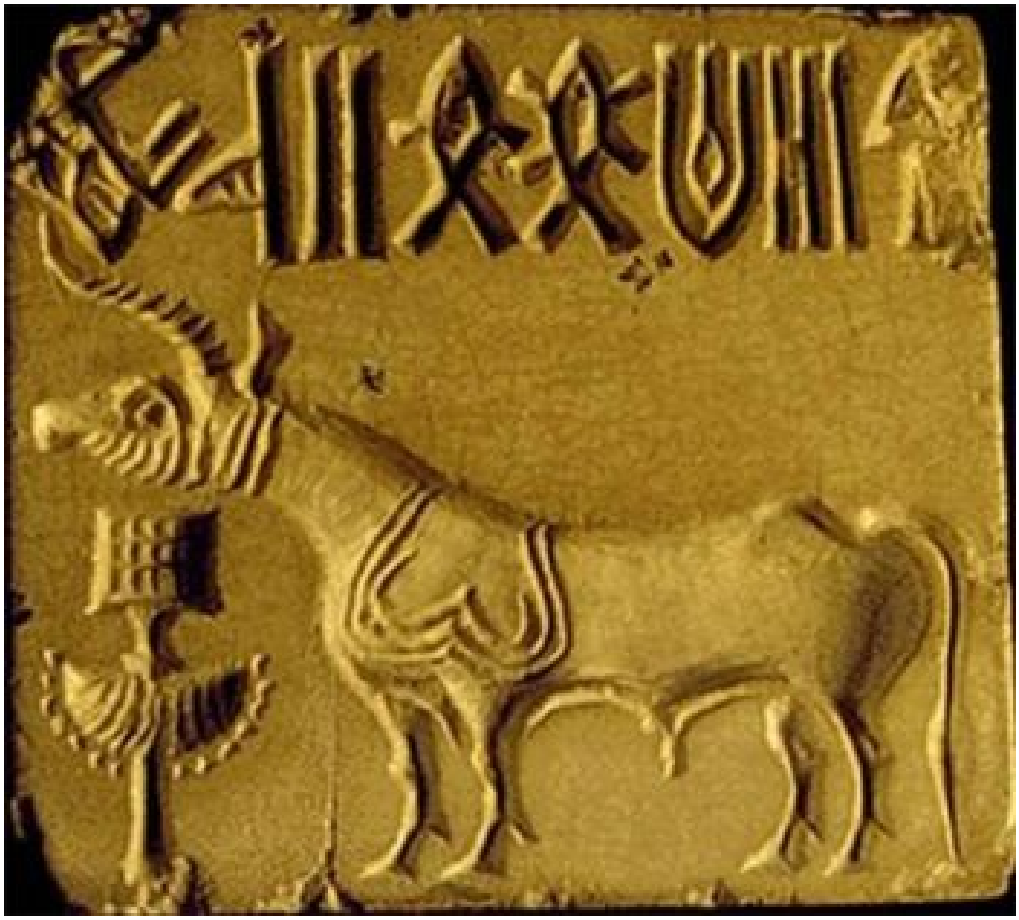
The people of the Indus Valley weren’t only practical but also knew how to appreciate the aesthetic and beauty of everyday objects. They made pottery, ceramics, and stamp seals. They often depicted animals that could represent deities. A good example of an animal symbol that could have a religious meaning is found on an ancient seal dating from the Mature Harappan period, proving the existence of animistic polytheism. This seal depicts a zebu bull with massive horns on its head. What this animal is supposed to represent is still speculated among scholars;

however, it is thought that the impressive seal with a zebu bull represents power and probably the most powerful clan in Harappa or Mohenjo-daro.



Ancient Indus seal depicting a zebu bull with large horns, probably originating from Harappa or Mohenjo-daro. Credit: The National Museum, New Delhi.

Another example of animal symbols is found on a seal depicting none other than a unicorn. It was one of the most common symbols used on seals in the Indus Valley. Although some people argue that unicorns might have existed and died out, it is much more likely that the usage of unicorns on these seals was in a mythical sense.



Unicorn seal, Mohenjo-daro. Credit: National Museum, Karachi.

Oftentimes, the unicorn has some bovine features and stands before an altar, which indicates that the seal might have been used for ritual purposes. The collar on the unicorn may indicate that the animal would have been used in sacrificial rituals. The seal might also represent a clan, similar to the zebu bull seal.

Aside from semiprecious metals, gold, and ceramics, the Indus people used terracotta, glazed steatite, agate, and shells to make jewelry, ornaments, and figurines that depicted humans, both male and female. They also made vessels out of terracotta, often painting animals such as monkeys, bears, cows, and dogs. These vessels were most likely used for ceremonial and religious purposes.

A great number of statuettes depicting female and male figures in motion have been found to match the Mature Harappan period. What differentiates these figurines from other types of artworks found in other urban centers at the time is the sophistication of movement and realistic postures and features. According to the director-general of the archaeological site in Mohenjo-daro, Sir John Marshall, “When I first saw them, I found it difficult to believe that they were prehistoric…I thought that some mistake must surely have been made; that these figures had found their way into levels some 3000 years older than those to which they properly

belonged."

The Indus Valley civilization was indeed ahead of its time, not only in art but also in technology, architecture, and (most likely) comprehending the world and life through the lens of religion. Citadels and major buildings were being built and used for religious purposes, but there are no signs of buildings being used for the same purpose in Mesopotamia and Egypt during this period.

The Dancing Girl, bronze, Mohenjo-daro (2600-1900 BC). Credit: The National Museum of India, New Delhi, Wikimedia Commons.

As a testament of religion in the Indus Valley, there are over a thousand extracted stamp seals of various sizes and with different symbols depicted on them, many of which also have a form of the first Indus script. Some of these seals depict a human deity with animal features. A human deity with bull horns, a tail, and hooves might be a version of what is known as the "Lord of Animals," "Lady of Animals," or

“Master” or “Mistress of Animals.” The motif of a human mastering wild animals was common in this period, and it is noted in Egypt and Mesopotamia as well. One seal shows a human deity with bull features fighting a beast that looks like a tiger with horns. Humans mastering the wilderness, animals, and other natural elements were commonly depicted in art during this period.

Concerning the early forms of the Indus script, there is a question on what language the Indus people spoke. Scholars suggest that there might have been several languages in use, thanks to the Indus people’s elaborate trading connections. However, it is believed that the Indus people spoke the proto-Dravidian language. Proto-Dravidian probably originated in Elam, and it was most likely brought to the Indus Valley by farmers who came from the Fertile Crescent.

As you can see, the Indus Valley civilization was advanced in regards to technology, art, and architecture. But the people of the valley were also advanced in transportation, as their economy mostly depended on trading. The Indus people might have been the first or among the first civilized nations to use wheels for transportation. They built ox carts to transport goods and people, and they also built small boats. At this time, the very beginning of relations between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia was established. The Indus Valley also traded with Afghanistan, Persia, and likely Egypt and Crete.

History has shown that every civilization eventually meets its decline, which was the case in the Late Harappan period. Around 1900 BCE, a gradual decline commenced, and urban centers were being slowly abandoned by 1700 BCE. Archaeologists revealed that around this time, the people of the Indus Valley entered more conflicts on a local level, while infectious diseases like leprosy added to the overall deterioration of the Harappan people. More regional cultures emerged in the area, while the people of the Late Harappan period were experiencing hardship.

Although people still made art, the artwork seems diluted in comparison to the Mature Harappan period, with fewer sculptures and statuettes being found and with seals and art becoming less elaborate. Urban centers and urbanized areas were in decline with rural expansion across the Indus Valley, and trading also became less common. New buildings were still being erected; however, these buildings weren’t as elaborate. The drainage and sanitation systems, as well as public baths, were no longer maintained, and it became evident that the Harappan civilization was about to end.

There is no clear answer as to what happened to the Indus people to cause this decline. There is a theory that Aryans invaded the region, but many scholars have dismissed it due to the lack of substantial, contextual, and material evidence. It is interesting to note that there is a complete lack of weapons in the Indus Valley, which contributes to the theory of the civilization’s decline. It is unlikely that the

Indus people could have avoided violent conflicts with other civilizations and cultures forever.

The answer might lay in the discovery of funerary pottery. Oftentimes, these were urns that depict a peacock with a human-like form inside of it, as well as the depiction of a hound. This hound might be the symbol of a deity that would be new to the region: Yama, the god of death in Hinduism and Buddhism. The emergence of this deity might signify the arrival of new cultural currents that led to a gradual decline of the Harappan people.

While there are theories of a new culture pushing out the Harappan people, it is unlikely to have been the direct cause of their decline. More than likely, the civilization's decline was due to several factors. The climate started to cool down significantly around 1800 BCE, which changed the way the rain and monsoons "fed" the land that nurtured the Harappans. With the climate shift, the river changed its course, and the general populace faced droughts. In combination with a decline in trading with Mesopotamia and Egypt, the people migrated toward the river Ganges, where they formed smaller urban settlements. The material culture also met its decline with the worsening living conditions, but the nation didn't completely disappear. Instead, the Harappan people thrived in other settlements in the Indus Valley from 1800 BCE to 325 BCE, which was when Alexander the Great invaded the Indian subcontinent.

The Last Stage of the Indus Valley Bronze Age

The culture known as the Ochre Colored Pottery culture thrived in the plains of the Ganges River, where the Harappan people ended up after the climate changes that struck the region around 1800 BCE. The Ochre Colored Pottery culture represents the last stage of the Bronze Age in the Indus Valley civilization.

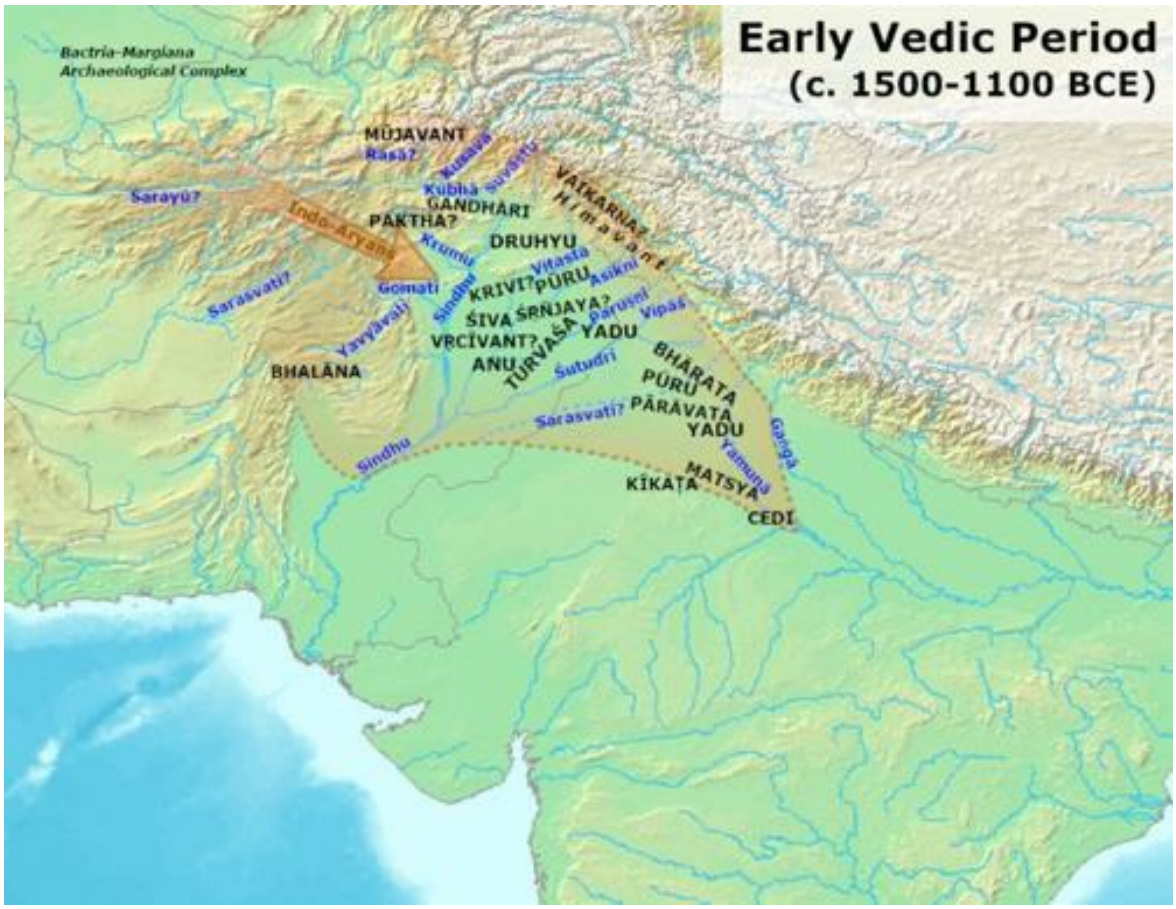
The Ochre culture thrived from around 2000 to 1500 BCE in the northern region of India in the area of Rajasthan. The originally unnamed and unknown culture that thrived in northern India was named after the ochre color that was left on the fingers of archaeologists who worked on excavations of pottery that had characteristic red and black details. Aside from ochre pottery, excavations unearthed copper vestiges and human-shaped statuettes and figurines similar to those found in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. However, unlike in Harappa, archaeologists uncovered a hoard of weapons like double axes, flat axes, harpoons, and swords.

The Ochre culture is considered to have arrived with the Indo-Iranian wave of migration into the Indian subcontinent around the late 3rd millennium BCE. Based on the similarities in art, pottery, and the use of anthropomorphic statuettes, the Ochre culture shares some distinctive cultural characteristics with the coinciding development of the Harappan and post-Harapan period, the latter of which witnessed the emergence of Vedic culture.

In the last stage of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, Vedic culture emerged in the northern Indian subcontinent, forging new cultural achievements and ancient Indian literature that would survive the tooth of time.

Chapter 3 – The Iron Age in the Indus Valley: The Succession of Harappan

Sometime between 1300 and 900 BCE, one of the most significant pieces of Indian and Hindu culture was written: the Vedas. The period between 1500 and 500 BCE is known as the Vedic period since this was the time when Vedic literature was being composed. The Vedic period marked the timeframe of another booming culture, which was developing and living in the plains of the Ganges.



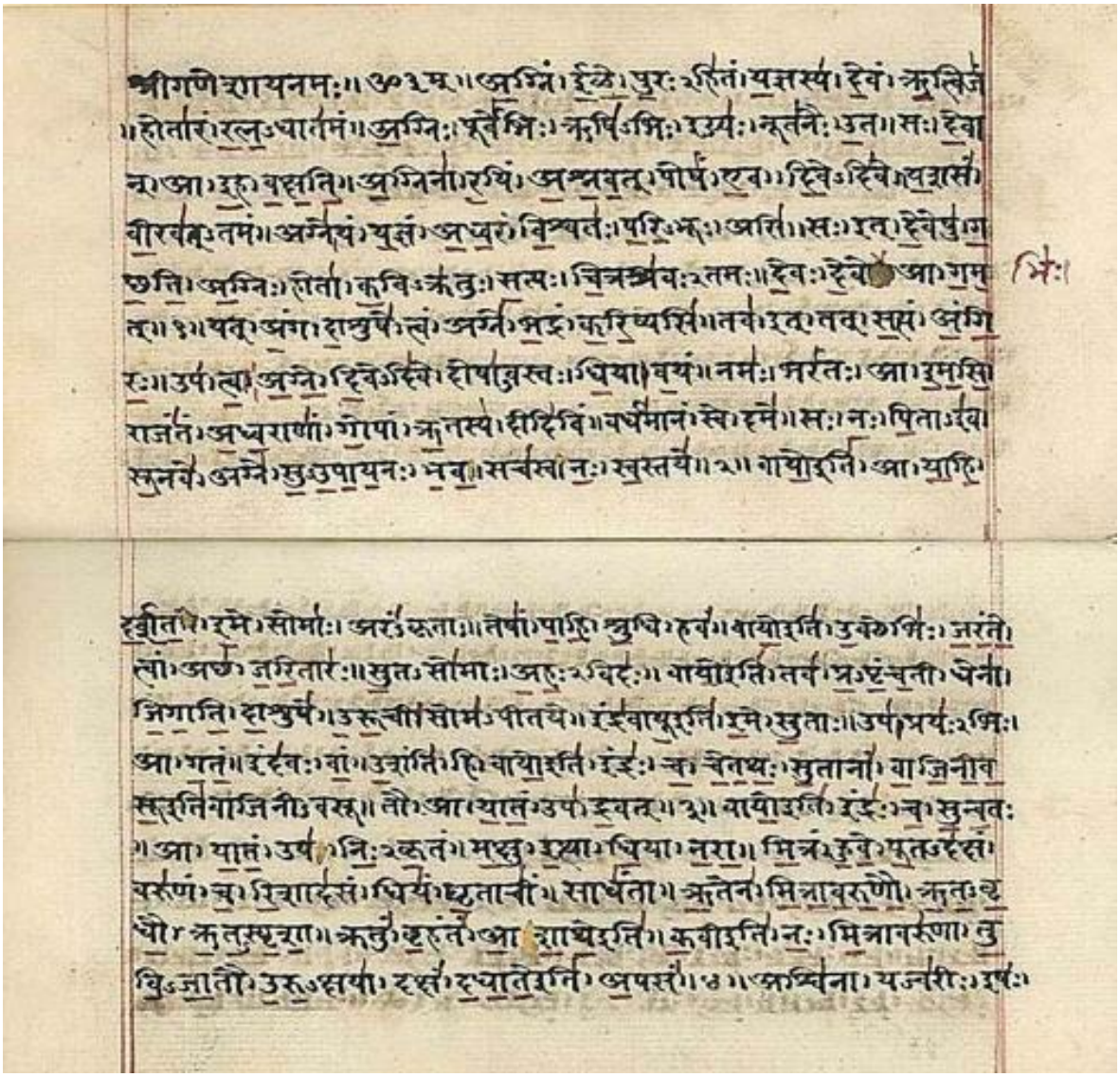
Early Vedic period (1500 to 1100 BCE). Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Vedas are religious and philosophical scriptures that represented the very core of knowledge for the ancient Indus people and are still relevant in Orthodox Hindu sects. They also stand as a testament to an important cultural and genetic connection between the Indo-Aryan people, who migrated to the Indian subcontinent, and Vedic culture. There isn't a group of people or a particular person who wrote and presented the Vedas to the Indus people.

The Vedic culture is characterized by the four parts of the Vedas, which were originally spread orally through precise narrations in the Old Indo-Aryan language long before the Vedas were ever written. It is not known when the Vedas were written; scholars presume that the Vedas were first recorded between 1500 and 500

BCE. Masters would teach their students about the Vedas, always emphasizing pronunciation so that all parts would be memorized and passed onto the next generation in the same form.

What is interesting about the Vedas is that its adherents believe they have existed forever. The Vedas explain the nature of the divine, while the word “Veda” itself means “knowledge.” This body of texts is believed to have been sent from the world of the divine to sages, who received this sacred knowledge while in a state of long and deep meditation. The Vedas are among the oldest, if not the very oldest religious scriptures in the world.



The Vedas, Rig Veda, *written in Devanagari. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.*

Since the Vedas have been passed down through oral lore, these scriptures are also known as Shruti. When translated, Shruti means “what is heard.” Another body of scriptures is known as Smriti, which means “what is remembered.” The Smriti texts

usually revolve around ancient heroes of Hindu culture and include literature such as *Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*.

The Vedas consist of four scriptures: the *Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda,* and *Atharva Veda*. The scriptures are also divided into more detailed classifications based on the types of stories and texts written in the Vedas. These subdivisions are called Aranyakas, Brahmanas, Samhitas, and Upanishads. Aranyakas are texts with numerous observances on life and religion. Brahmanas are commentary texts related to rituals. Prayers, blessings, mantras, and benedictions are presented in the Samhitas, and Upanishads are narratives and dialogues that talk about the philosophy of the ancient Indus people, something that is still relevant in some Hindu sects.

It is believed that the very intonation of the words contained in the Vedas is the sound of the divine universe and that one could mimic the sounds of the universe by singing or reading the Vedas. That is why the translation of these sacred texts would annul a part of its meaning that was and still is considered divine in some Hindu sects.

Substantial parallels in the first Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, which tracks its roots to ancient times, and the Vedas conclude that the Indo-Aryans and the Indus people of the Vedic culture are closely related, at least through spiritual beliefs. The theory makes even more sense when considering the Indo-Aryan migration into the Indian subcontinent. However, this theory is not accepted as a universal truth.

The Four Vedas and the Secret of Eternal Knowledge

The ancient people of the Indus Valley would ask questions about the meaning of life, their place in the world, and the nature of everything. How did the sun, celestial bodies, and all living beings come to be? How was everything created in its natural order? How can one become whole and be in unison with the divine? Reflective thoughts are the core of the Vedas.

The *Rig Veda* is comprised of ten mandalas, or books, that contain hymns to different gods, such as Agni (fire god) and Indra (storm god). These gods were eventually viewed as embodiments of Brahman, the source of all life. At the same time, Brahman is the end of everything—the very beginning and the very end of everything that exists. Wondering how, why, and what is strongly encouraged through the verses of the *Rig Veda*.

The *Sama Veda* represents the melody for the lyrics in the *Rig Veda*, as the texts in this Veda are almost completely taken from the *Rig Veda*. The *Sama Veda* is translated as "Song Knowledge" or "Melody Knowledge." The melody in the *Sama Veda* is supposed to be combined with a ceremonial dance, and together, it is believed to purify the soul and lift the spirit.

The *Yajur Veda*, the third Veda, is related to religious worship, and it contains chants and mantras. This Veda is also closely related to the *Rig Veda*, and it means "Ritual Knowledge" when translated.

When the name of the last Veda, the *Atharva Veda*, is translated, we get a glimpse into the legendary figure of the priest Atharvan. *Atharva Veda* means "knowledge of Atharvan," so most scholars believe that this Veda was written based on the magical and religious knowledge of Atharvan. The *Atharva Veda* contains magical spells, prayers, and rituals for everyday things. It also talks about how to ward off evil spirits and protect one's marriage. In addition, the Veda contains philosophical observations about life.

All four Vedas essentially explain life and its meaning through three divine figures: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma is the creator of all existence and everything that lives, but he also represents life and existence itself. Vishnu is the preserver of life. Vishnu is supposed to protect the world and descend to Earth when the balance between good and evil is compromised. In the Hindu religion, it is believed that Vishnu was incarnated nine times since the universe's creation, and there is also the belief that this deity will descend among mortals once again before the world comes to an end. Shiva is the opposite of Vishnu, as the role of this deity is to destroy and bring havoc to the world. However, Shiva destroys the world only to recreate it. Shiva is not perceived as the ultimate opposite of Vishnu, as Shiva is both good and evil at the same time. Destruction is not always bad—sometimes, destruction is

needed to create something better and more valuable, which means that destruction can also be beneficial and even necessary at times.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva together make the holy triumvirate in the Hindu religion, and they are responsible for the world and life as it is—the good and the bad, destruction and creation. According to the Vedas, every person has a part of Brahma's, Vishnu's, and Shiva's essence within them, and their soul is contained within other deities as well, such as Agni, Indra, and Varuna. Agni represents the mouth and the voice of the gods and is the messenger between the divine and the mortal world on Earth. Agni means "fire," and this deity serves as the Hindu fire god. Indra is the god of thunderstorms and lightning. He is the ruler of the gods (Devas) and the king of heaven (Svarga). Varuna was originally the god of the skies, although he was later associated with water. Varuna is also the god of truth and justice and the father of Bhima and Hanuman. Bhima is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, which is one of the most famous and well-known epics in the Vedas, and Hanuman is a deity that helps the god Rama and appears in the Vedas epic *Ramayana*.

The Vedas don't only tell a story about spirituality through insightful philosophical thought but also include important lessons and metaphors through epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

The *Mahabharata* tells a story about a battle for the throne and the Kurukshetra War, which involved two families, the Pandavas and Kauravas. This is the longest epic that was ever written, and all the events take place in the Indian subcontinent. This is where another major difference between the ancient Indus Valley civilization and the Vedic period can be found. During the dominance of the Indus Valley civilization by the Ravi River, there were no mentions of wars, conflicts, and battles, and archaeologists didn't find any weapons or signs of a battle in the region. On the other hand, the Vedas describe conflicts, battles for the throne, wars, and kings. The *Mahabharata* describes decades of war between the Pandavas and Kauravas, describing war strategies, weapons, and heroes in the battle for the throne of Hastinapur. However, despite the 100,000 lines dedicated to this war, scholars can't prove that any of the events are historically true.

Another war is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, the Battle of the Ten Kings. This war will form a new tribe, the Kuru, which subsequently formed the Kuru Kingdom.

Wars, Battles, and the Kuru Kingdom

Before the Vedic period, there were no mentions of wars or kings, although the *Rig Veda* describes conflicts between the Aryans and the Dasyus and Dasas. Who were the Dasyus and Dasas? Dasas means "the servant of the gods," but it can also mean "enemy." Whether this name is a suffix or a representation of a metaphor is not yet clear to scholars. However, some scholars believe, including Asko Parpola, an Indologist and Sindhologist based in Finland, that the Dasyus and Dasas are the Dahyu and Dahae. These were Iranian tribes that penetrated northwestern India in the Early Vedic period and warred with the Aryans.

The *Rig Veda* tells about the various battles and bloody conflicts between the alienated tribes, one of which included the Bharatas, an Indo-Aryan tribe.

Bharata or Mahabharata (as mentioned in the applauded epic) is the legendary emperor of India. According to the epic in the *Rig Veda*, Bharata is the ancestor of Kurus, who later formed the Vedic Kuru Kingdom. As the epic describes, Bharata is both an ancestor of the Kauravas and Pandavas, the rival royal families in the *Mahabharata*. The legend of Bharata, who is unlikely to have existed in reality, states that he was born as the son of King Dushyanta and Shakuntala.

King Dushyanta loved to hunt and would often go on hunting trips. One day, he spotted a beautiful girl in the forest. This was Shakuntala, and he courted her, presenting her with a royal ring. Dushyanta had to go back to the capital of his kingdom, but he told Shakuntala to bring the ring with her to the royal court when she was ready to become his queen. Shakuntala gave birth to a healthy and strong baby boy who grew stronger each day. The baby was named Sarvadamana for his strength; the name means "the subduer of all." The *Mahabharata* continues to follow the life of Sarvadamana. Eventually, his name is changed to Bharata, which when translated means "cherished" or "the one who is cherished."

According to the epic, when Bharata was six years old, his mother decided to bring him before his father and claim her place as queen. The king was so embarrassed by Shakuntala's visit that he dismissed her claims and called her a liar. He refused to acknowledge her and their son. Divine forces interfered at this point, appearing in the royal court in the form of a voice that told King Dushyanta that he had to accept his son and Shakuntala. Bharata eventually succeeded his father and soon became the subduer of everything as far as the eye could see. He was strong and decisive, and he became a leader with unheard-of might.

Bharata married three wives who gave birth to nine sons; however, Bharata was disappointed, as none of his sons was fit to rule in his stead. His wives were so distraught that none of them could give birth to a worthy successor that they killed all their children. The sacrifice was so great that, when combined with Bharata's

sacrifices by the Ganges River, it resulted in the birth of his adopted son, who would become the new king after his death. His name was Bhumanyu.

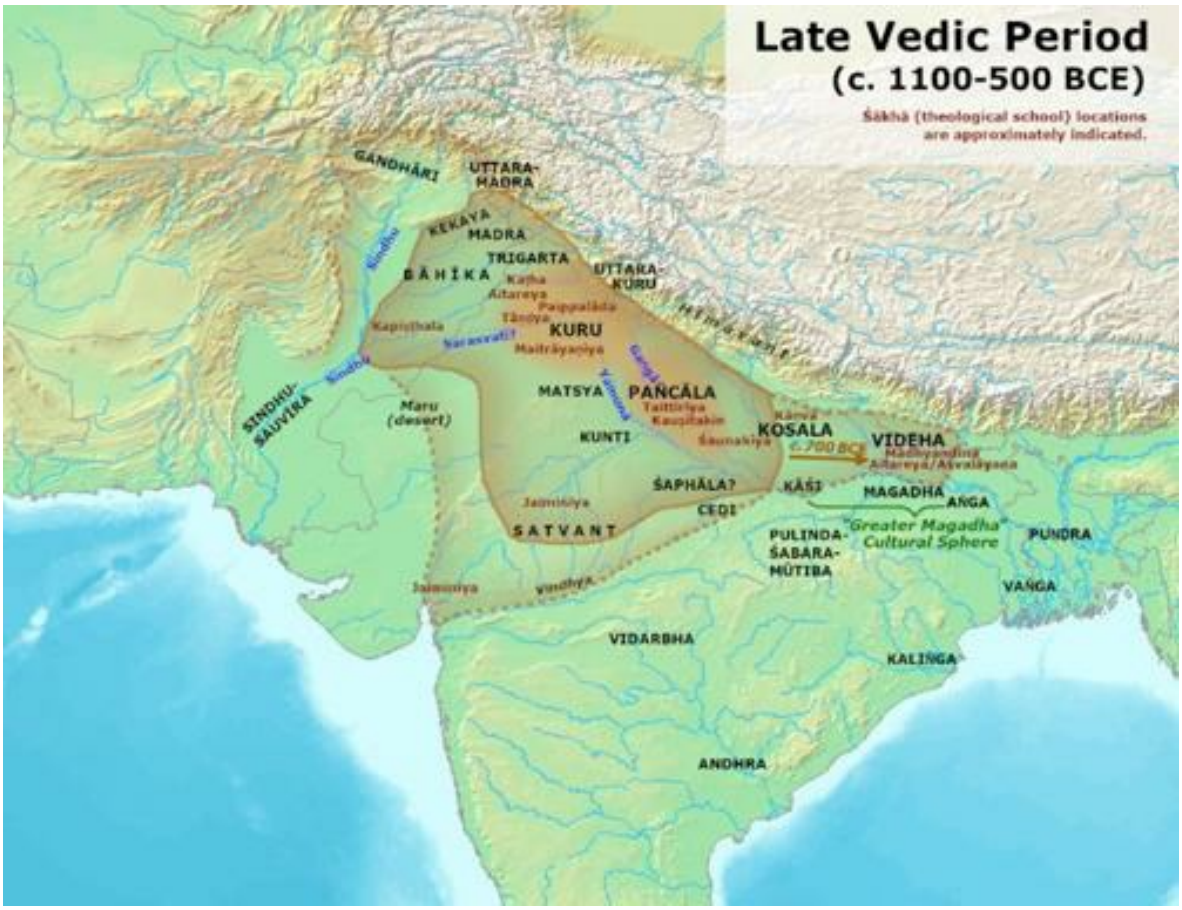
This legend intertwines historical facts that have been confirmed by historians and scholars, which takes us to tribal chief Sudas Paijavana, the leader of the Bharatas tribe during the Battle of the Ten Kings, which took place in the 2nd millennium BCE. The Battle of the Ten Kings is also described in the *Mahabharata* in detail. However, it remains unclear why the war started. It is presumed that the local chiefs fought for dominance over the rivers in the region, as rivers were important for irrigation.

Another theory states that the war between Sudas and the alliance of the ten tribal kings—Adu, Yadu, Puru, Tarvasa, Alina, Druhyu, Paktha, Bhalanas, Vishanin, and Siva—happened because Sudas decided to replace Vasishtha with another sage named Vishvamitra. Vasishtha is mentioned in the *Rig Veda* as being one of the oldest and most respected sages, while Vishvamitra is considered a semi-divine being.

According to a verse in the *Mahabharata*, Sudas decided to cross the rivers of Sutlej and Beas on his way to Kurukshetra, which was enough reason to start a battle with the alliance he encountered. Again, the exact reason for the war is not mentioned.

Scholars weren't able to retrieve the names of the tribes that Sudas fought in the Battle of the Ten Kings. However, some scholars believe that he could have battled some of the following tribes: the Purus, Yadu, Matsyas, Yaksu, Pakthas, Druhyus, Alinas, Bhalanas, Vishanins, Anu, Vaikarna, and Sivas.

Sudas won the battle, which resulted in his tribe merging with the Puru tribe. This merger, which created the Kuru, was the very beginning of the first state in India. The Kuru extended from modern-day Delhi to Punjab and Haryana; some parts of the state were also located in the area of western Uttar Pradesh. The Kuru tribal union eventually came to be known as the Kuru Kingdom.



The Kuru Kingdom and surrounding kingdoms, Late Vedic period (1100 to 500 BCE). Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Kuru Kingdom was formed between 1200 and 800 BCE, and it is the first recorded center of power in the Indian subcontinent, with Hastinapur as its capital (at least for the majority of the kingdom's existence). The kingdom had a central authority based in the capital, but it was divided into regions and districts. Kuru Proper was a region in the Kuru Kingdom that was inhabited by the majority of the kingdom's subjects, and it was further divided into provinces, regions, and territories. Kurujangala was another region in the kingdom, and it was mostly covered in thick jungle. It was the home to the Jangala tribe, whose survival greatly depended on the flow of the Yamuna. Kurujangala was further split into three regions, one of which had three cities: Panaprashta, Swarnprastha, and Indraprastha.

Kurukshetra was the third area of the kingdom, and it had been the very place where Sudas came before the Battle of the Ten Kings. Kurukshetra was blessed with five rivers—the Oghavati, Saraswati, Hiranwati, Apaga, and Drisadhwati—and covered in vast plains.

The Kuru Kingdom's first capital was Indraprastha, at least according to literature sources after the Middle Vedic period. However, scholars claim that the first capital

was Asandivat in Haryana.

The kingdom was mostly comprised of nomadic tribes and tribes that relied on domesticated animals. These tribes descended from the mountains before the Battle of the Ten Kings, shifting toward the plains of the Ganges. Pastoral and nomadic tribes shifted to agriculture, cultivating barley and rice. The tribes also started using iron, mentioned in literature as the “black metal.”

Before the Middle Vedic period, during the Rigvedic times, the class system only recognized two classes: Arya and Dasa. Arya was the ruling class of conquerors who subdued the Dravidian people. Dravidians, who had origins from South Asia, were considered to be godless savages and were subjugated as the slave class in the Kuru Kingdom. Their language and dark complexion differentiated them from Aryans (not to be confused with the later definition of Aryan that Adolf Hitler supported—the Indo-Aryans came from a region called Aryavarta). There were also noted cultural differences.

In the Middle Vedic period, the class system became more elaborate, with the society of the Kuru Kingdom being divided into four classes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Brahmin was the class of priests who were considered to be gurus, physicians, and intellectuals, as well as the guardians of sacred knowledge. Kshatriya represented the military aristocracy, as Kshatriyas were a class of warriors in the Middle Vedic period. They were second in the caste hierarchy after the Brahmins. Vaishya is the third class in the caste system of the Kuru Kingdom. Vaishyas were most commonly cattle keepers and farmers; however, this caste expanded to other careers over time, such as money lenders, traders, and even landowners. The fourth class in the Kuru Kingdom was the Shudras. According to religious texts used during this period, the purpose of this class was to serve the first three castes. Shudras were usually laborers and craftsmen.

It is said the four castes originated from a primeval man who is said to have created Brahmin from his mouth, Kshatriya from his arms, and Vaishya from his legs. The Shudras are said to have come from his feet, which also describe their caste role as servants to the other three social classes.

The Kings of the Kuru Kingdom

Of course, a kingdom couldn't be called a kingdom if there wasn't a king to rule it, so naturally, the Kuru Kingdom had a king, which was called a raja. The kingdom was rarely inherited by blood lineage; instead, the kings of Kuru were chosen by the Samiti, a tribal assembly in the early Rigveda period. The assembly also consisted of women. The importance of the Samiti deteriorated in the Late Vedic period, as there is evidence that the kingship became hereditary.

The king wouldn't have ruled the entire kingdom by himself, so scholars believe there was some kind of king's court in the Late Vedic period. The king would have ruled with a priest as his guide and advisor, while the royal court would have consisted of chieftains, an army chief, emissary, spies, heralds, and food distributors who helped the ruler with administration. The king would also organize frequent sacrifices to showcase his power and maintain the natural order in the caste system, with which they had help from Brahmin priests.

The king would also choose several tribunes among the common people as well as from subdued tribes. These tribunes would be sent to nearby tribes and kingdoms to pillage and raid, which was a great way to increase wealth and assert dominance in neighboring territories. One of the most common ways of asserting dominance in northern India was by the Ashvamedha. The Ashvamedha is a horse sacrifice specifically performed by newly elected kings. The king would send a horse around the kingdom for a year, and it would be accompanied by several warriors. Anyone in the kingdom could challenge the warriors for a year, and if no warrior was defeated, the horse would be returned to the king in the capital, where he would sacrifice the horse and confirm his authority and dominance.

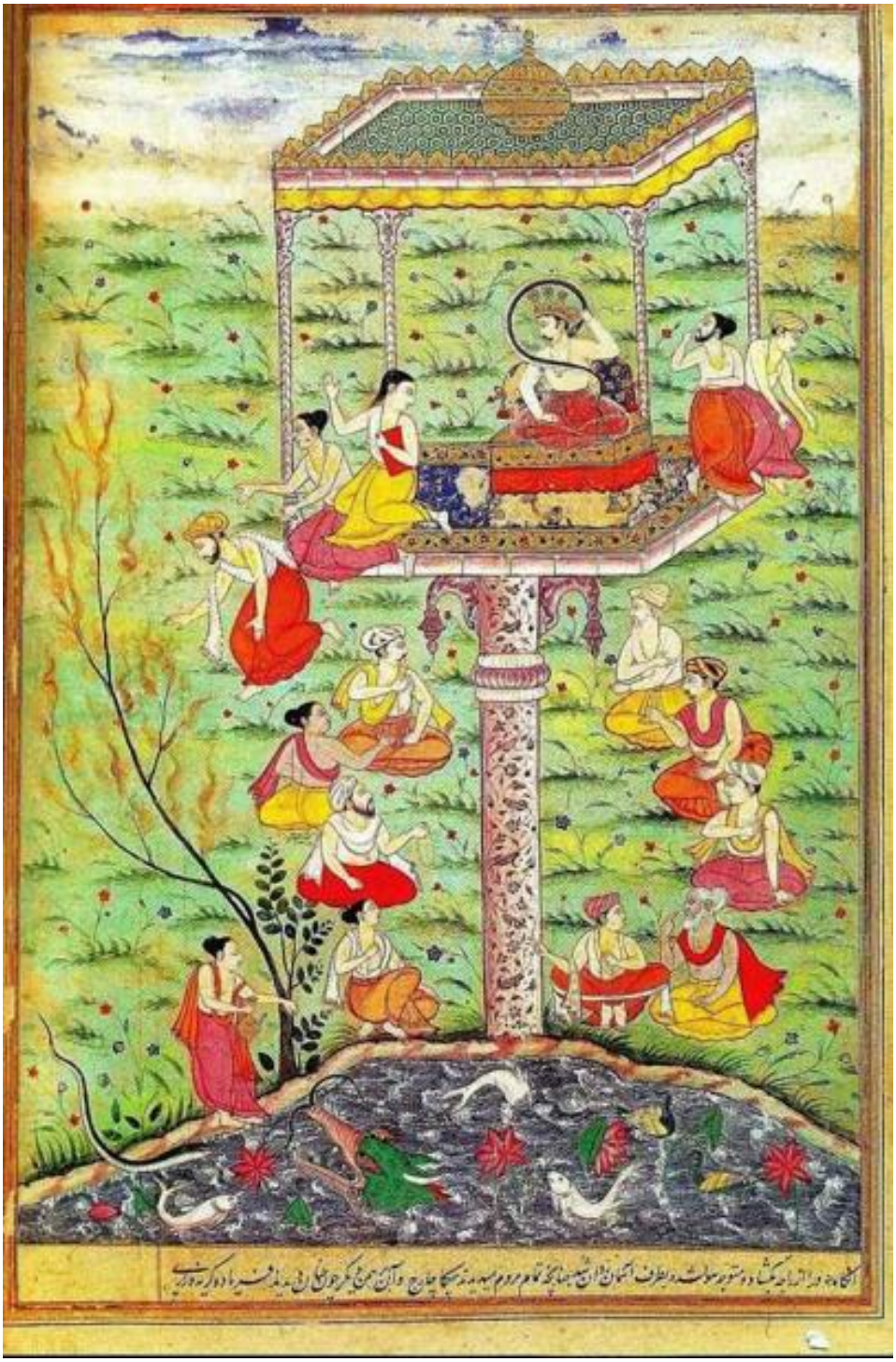
The *Mahabharata* is used as the main source for studying the royal succession throughout the Vedic era of the Kuru Kingdom. The characters in the *Mahabharata* can't be historically confirmed with certainty, so this makes the epic a unique source of legends and myths that potentially intertwine with reality.

One of the most prominent Kuru kings mentioned in the *Mahabharata* is Parikshit, who ruled in the Middle Vedic period between 1100 and 800 BCE. Parikshit and his son, who inherited his father's throne, are said to be responsible for strengthening the dominance of the kingdom. Parikshit is further described in the Vedas as the king who made the darkness go away and brought prosperity and abundance to the kingdom. He had a long reign of twenty-four years and lived to be sixty; however, scholars cannot confirm this as a reliable historical fact. Parikshit is also known as the "universal king" in the *Mahabharata*, as everyone lived happily and in abundance during his reign.

It remains unknown how Parikshit died. His death revolves around a myth described

in the Vedas. Parikshit went hunting. He was tired and unable to track the deer he had been hunting the entire day. So, he stopped to ask a sage named Shamika if he had seen the deer. Shamika was in a deep state of meditation, so he didn't give Parikshit an answer to his question. Parikshit was impatient and angry with Shamika, so he took a dead snake and placed it around Shamika's neck.

Shamika had a son named Sringin, and he was furious about what had happened. Sringin cursed Parikshit to die in seven days from a snakebite. Parikshit made peace with his death, but an effort was still made to protect the king by having all the king's ministers build a massive mansion that would stand on a single pole so that no snake could approach it. Parikshit retreated to the mansion and was well guarded, but it was all in vain as the king of all snakes, Takshaka, arrived.



The death of Parikshit, a scene from the Birla Razmnama *where Takshaka is shown biting Parikshit. Author unknown. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.*

Since Parikshit was guarded in a mansion that rested on a single pole, Takshaka couldn't get to him, especially since he also had to get past the king's guards. Takshaka turned into an insect and hid in the fruit that was served to Parikshit. When the king lifted the fruit to his mouth, the snake bit him.

To save the king, his ministers called upon a sage who could cure snake bites, Kashyapa. Takshaka offered Kashyapa more wealth if he chose not to save the king, which the sage accepted. The Pandavas led a battle against Takshaka, while Parikshit's son, Janamejaya, promised to slay Takshaka within seven days from his father's death. He wanted to sacrifice the snake king; however, the divine Indra stopped Janamejaya in his attempt. This day is remembered as the celebration of Nagas—snakes—known as Naga Panchami.

Janamejaya is described in the *Mahabharata* as a conqueror and a great king, with numerous conquests and raids to the south and east. Janamejaya abdicated despite the potency he had as a king and warrior. The reason behind his abdication was a dispute he had with Vaisampayana, the narrator of the *Mahabharata*, one of the authors of the Vedic texts, and an ancient Indian sage. According to some sources, Janamejaya's throne was succeeded by his son, Satanika, while other sources note that the new successor was Janamejaya's grandson, Asvmedhadatta.

During Janamejaya's reign, the Kuru Kingdom became the main political and cultural power center in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. The lineage of the Kuru kings, which consisted of both Kauravas and Pandavas, continued with the consolidation of the kingdom until the fateful shift of power around 500 BCE when the kingdom fell. After the rule of Parikshit, twenty-seven kings ruled the Kuru Kingdom, with Kshemaka being the last king.

The history of the Kuru Kingdom and its prominent kings remains veiled in myths and legends. The *Mahabharata* remains the richest source of knowledge about the Kuru dynasty, even though a great part of the Vedic stories can't be confirmed as historical facts.

The scene shows the sacrifice of Sarpa Satra (a sacrifice that would destroy all snakes), with Astika (a sage) stopping Janamejaya from destroying Takshaka and the other Nagas. Author unknown. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 4 – The Demise of the Kuru Kingdom and the Shift of Power in Ancient India

The Kuru Kingdom was founded in the aftermath of the Battle of the Ten Kings around 1200 BCE and found its demise around 500 BCE.

The Kuru Kingdom wasn't an isolated center of power, as neighboring states in the region of the Ganges bloomed into prominent kingdoms. With the demise of the Kuru Kingdom, the power shifted to other parts of the Indo-Gangetic Plain during the Late Vedic period. The kingdom of Panchala was one of the strongest kingdoms in ancient India, lasting from between 900 BCE and 500 BCE. Panchala was located in Doab, which is a land region between the Ganges and the Yamuna. Panchala had strong diplomatic relations with the Kuru Kingdom and emerged as a power center east of Kuru. According to scholars, Panchala was formed out of multiple tribes, including the Krivi tribe that might have come to this region from the Indus River plain.

By the end of 500 BCE, Panchala ceased to exist as a kingdom and transformed into an oligarchy as a part of the Solasa Mahajanapadas. The Mahajanapadas were an oligarchic coalition, while "Solasa" means sixteen. Kuru wasn't a part of the Mahajanapadas, as the kingdom had already found its demise with the arrival of the Salvi tribe, also known as Salva.

The Mahajanapadas in the post-Vedic period around 500 BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Scholars can't confirm with certainty from where the Salva came. However, they can link the origin of the Salva to the Trigarta Kingdom, located in the northern area of India and ruled by the Katoch dynasty. Trigarta is also mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, together with Panchala and the remaining states in the Mahajanapadas at the end of the Vedic period.

After the invasion of the Kuru Kingdom, the Salva tribe took over the area around the Yamuna River, where it soon became a dominant force. The Salva settled near the Matsya Kingdom, which was one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas. Kuru wasn't entirely decimated, as its people survived and later combined with the Salva and the Kingdom of Surasena, another one of the Mahajanapadas.

A coin found in Surasena, dating between 400 BCE and 300 BCE. Credit: The British Museum, Wikimedia Commons.

Although the Salva was a non-Vedic tribe, they accepted Sanskrit and merged with the local culture in ancient India. Eventually, they assimilated with the local Vedic Mahajapanada of Surasena and what was left of Kuru. In the post-Vedic period, as the *Mahabharata* testifies, the Salva tribe accepted the teachings of the Vedic gurus.

However, despite the case of assimilation of the invasive Salva with one of the Mahajanapadas, the sixteen kingdoms remained quite diverse. The Mahajanapadas essentially represented small tribal kingdoms, which all emerged in the Late Vedic and post-Vedic periods.

In this melting pot of political and cultural differences, the tribal kingdoms gathered around the same religion and spiritual principles. Aside from the sixteen kingdoms, which were the most powerful in the Indo-Gangetic Plain, numerous tribal republics bloomed in the region. These prominent forces would soon be replaced with a new political and cultural power: the Mauryan Empire.

The Sixteen Mahajanapadas

Mahajanapadas, also known in the written form as the Maha Janapadas, is translated as the “great country” in Sanskrit, which partly explains their political and cultural significance in ancient India.

In the beginning, the Mahajanapadas were perhaps an accidental coalition between various tribal states and kingdoms that emerged in the plains of the Ganges and Indus. Over time, though, they became a significant political body with multiple independent authorities. The Mahajanapadas were formed around 600 BCE, coinciding with the deterioration of the Kuru Kingdom, which was taken over by the Salva tribe. The kingdoms that formed the Mahajanapadas were not any less invasive in comparison to the Salva, as these kingdoms expanded politically and territorially by taking land and raiding.

The sixteen kingdoms of Mahajanapadas were Anga, Assaka, Avanti, Chedi, Gandhara, Kamboja, Kashi, Kosala, Kuru, Matsya, Magadha, Malla, Panchala, Surasena, Vamsa, and Vajji.

Anga was one of the main cities in ancient India, and it was located in the present-day region of western Bengal and Bihar. Anga became one of the sixteen oligarchic republics in the second wave of urbanization that shifted from the Indus to the Ganges. Anga was an important trading center in ancient India, as was Assaka, which was located in present-day Maharashtra in central India.

One of the kingdoms that later became a part of the Mauryan Empire was Avanti. It was one of the spiritual centers of Buddhism and was divided into two provinces that had a natural border in the form of the river Vetravati (Betwa). The Chedi clan was one of the oldest in ancient India. It is mentioned in the old scriptures of the *Rig Veda* and was divided into two different settlements. One of the settlements was located near the Yamuna River, and the other bloomed in the mountains of Nepal.

The Gandhara had existed as a tribe since the beginning of the Vedic period. The Gandhara were known for being rather aggressive; they were very familiar with warfare.

The Kamboja tribe, which later became one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, was mentioned as early as the Gandhara, as they were set on both sides of the Hindu Kush. Kamboja was an Indo-Iranian tribe that came to the region in the first wave of urbanization.

The Kashi settled around Varanasi, which got its name from the two rivers surrounding it, the Varuna and Assi. Kashi was the most powerful kingdom of all the Mahajanapadas until the emergence of Buddhism.

Kosala was located near the river Ganges from the south and surrounded by the Himalayas in the north, while another river, the Gandaki, marked the natural border

of the kingdom in the east. Kashi merged with Kosala after the rise of Buddhism in the 5th century BCE and was later part of the Mauryan Empire. In the 5th century BCE, Kuru transformed into a republic and became one of the Mahajanapadas after the Salva invasion.

Matsya once belonged to the kingdom of Chedi. Matsya eventually gained its autonomy and became one of the sixteen prominent kingdoms in ancient India, taking the territory of Jaipur, Bharatpur, and Alwar.

Magadha emerged as a strong but loathed kingdom in present-day Bihar. This was due to the fact that Magadhas weren't Brahmins. Despite its ill-disposed status among other Brahmin kingdoms, Magadha was still one of the strongest kingdoms in ancient India.

Malla is often mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures, as Buddha spent his last day in one of the nine provinces of Malla, where he had his last meal as well. Malla is also described as one of the strongest tribes in India.

The Panchalas settled east from the Kuru tribe between the river Ganges and the Himalayas. Panchala was initially a monarchy and relied on the rule of a king; however, it later transformed into a republic in the 5th century BCE with the coalition of the sixteen oligarchic republics.

Surasena was one of the chief kingdoms during the rise of Buddhism. One of the kings of Surasena, Avantiputra, was also one of Buddha's main disciples, and he promoted the sacred knowledge of Buddhism throughout the kingdom.

In the deep north of ancient India was Vajji or Vriji, which was one of the most influential kingdoms among the Mahajanapadas around the 5th century BCE. Vajji consisted of nine different tribes, and it was an important center of Buddhism. It helped spread Buddha's doctrine and spiritual philosophy.

Vamsa, also known as Vatsa, is an offspring republic derived from the Kurus. It occupied the territory around present-day Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. Its richest and most powerful city was the capital of Kaushambi. Kaushambi was one of the main power centers in the region, with numerous merchants residing there. The capital grew to be prosperous thanks to the fact that it was a natural strategic center of imported and exported goods, as well as a favorite stop of travelers coming from the south and northwest. Udayana was the king of Vamsa during the time of Buddha. He was a powerful ruler and one of Buddha's followers. Udayana promoted Buddhism and made it the main religion of his kingdom.

The Teachings of Siddhartha Gautama and Buddhism in Ancient India

Alongside the coalition of the sixteen oligarchic republics, a novel spiritual philosophy was born independently through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Buddha, meaning "awakened one" or "enlightened

one." Siddhartha was born to an old noble family called the Shakya. The Shakya inhabited the area of Greater Magadha during the Vedic period, and their origins can be traced back to the 1st millennium BCE.

Ancient India during the time of Buddha, around 500 BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Shakya formed an oligarchic republic with the capital in Kapilavastu, where Siddhartha was raised. Siddhartha was born to a Shakyan oligarch named Suddhodana and his wife, Queen Maya. The Shakyas mostly depended on the rice they cultivated, so it is no wonder that the name of Suddhodana is translated as "the one who grows pure rice."

Suddhodana is often mentioned as a king in later scriptures, but it is unlikely that Buddha's father was an autocratic leader, i.e., a monarch. Shakya was probably run by a small elite group that had the power to vote for a leader, known as the raja. Suddhodana might have been a raja, as the references to Buddha's father mention him being the Shakyan king. Siddhartha himself also carried the title of prince before becoming the Enlightened One.

Siddhartha was born in Lumbini, located in modern-day Nepal in Lumbini Province. Lumbini translates to "the lovely" and is one of the most important pilgrimages for

Buddhists. Scholars and historians can't agree on the exact year of Siddhartha's birth or death, but it is assumed that Siddhartha Gautama lived between 563 BCE and 483 BCE or between 480 BCE and 400 BCE.

Siddhartha was brought up in luxury. However, after witnessing the four sights—an old man bent due to his age, an ill person, a corpse, and an ascetic wandering the world—he decided to leave the palace and lead a stern life in the woods with some of the greatest gurus of the time.

According to numerous biographies written on the life of Siddhartha and his transformation from a prince to a religious leader, he traveled with his royal servant, Chandaka, who was there when the young prince saw the aging man bent from old age. Siddhartha was deeply moved by what he had seen, and he asked Chandaka about it. Chandaka explained that a part of life was growing old.

After seeing the four sights, Siddhartha woke up in the middle of the night, troubled by what he had witnessed. He then saw his four servants asleep around him. Their postures appeared eerie and unnatural to Siddhartha, as they all looked dead. He decided to leave the palace in the middle of the night with Chandaka and his white horse, Kanthaka. He was twenty-nine when he decided to live as an ascetic, leaving his wife, Yasodhara, and his son, Rahula, behind. The sights he had seen all revolved around suffering, and they made Siddhartha leave his life of comfort and privilege in search of answers that would decipher the meaning of human life and justify the suffering he had witnessed.

However, before he joined the ascetic gurus, Siddhartha left Chandaka and his horse, cut off his hair, and crossed the river Anomiya (Anoma). During his time with the gurus, Siddhartha realized that he couldn't find the answers to his questions and that he couldn't be released from suffering by renouncing all bodily pleasures and practicing severe self-denial and restraint. Siddhartha also knew from experience that a life of extreme luxury wouldn't create a life free of suffering. Neither lifestyle provided the answers he was seeking, so Siddhartha decided that the key to spiritual freedom was a balance between the two.

Siddhartha Gautama's epiphany signified the beginning of a new chapter for himself and spirituality in ancient India. His departure from his home and the comfort of his palace was considered to be a great sacrifice; this act is known as the Great Renunciation.

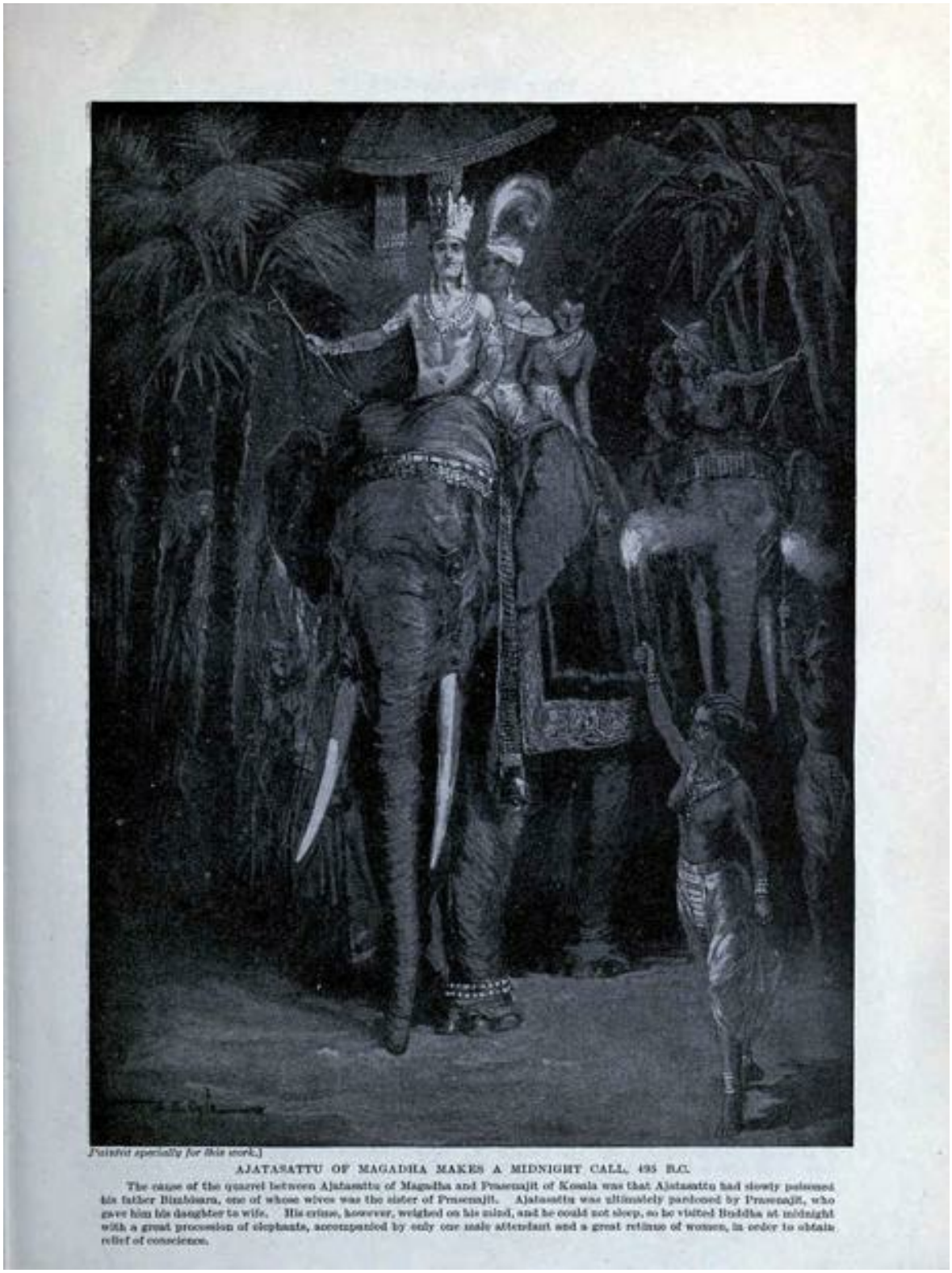
Siddhartha also encountered King Bimbisara, who was the ruler of Magadha, one of the great Mahajanapadas, while he was in Rajgir collecting money, food, clothes, and other items for those in need. Siddhartha was still on his journey toward enlightenment when Bimbisara offered him a part of his kingdom. Although Siddhartha refused to take a part of Magadha, he promised Bimbisara that his kingdom would be the first place he would visit once he found enlightenment.

Aside from being a great protector and a friend of Buddha, Bimbisara also indirectly laid the foundations of the later Maurya Empire by expropriating the kingdom of Anga, which was also one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas.

The scene of Bimbisara offering Siddhartha a part of his kingdom. Credit: Hintha, Wikimedia Commons.

Bimbisara was later imprisoned by his son and heir, Ajatashatru. Bimbisara killed himself while in prison in 493 BCE. According to tradition, it is thought that Bimbisara is burning in hell due to taking his own life. He waits there until he is finally reincarnated.

Ajatashatru was also a contemporary of Buddha. In fact, Magadha reached its peak during his reign. Ajatashatru conquered many of the neighboring kingdoms, including Kosala, Kashi, and a great number of smaller kingdoms in the region. Ajatashatru was very talented when it came to warfare, and he even invented new weapons, a scythed chariot, and an engine that would hurl massive stones onto his opponents' armies and city walls. He was the most powerful ruler in North India, reigning from 492 BCE to 460 BCE.



Painted specially for this work.]

AJATASATTU OF MAGADHA MAKES A MIDNIGHT CALL, 495 B.C.

The cause of the quarrel between Ajatasattu of Magadha and Prasenajit of Kosala was that Ajatasattu had slowly poisoned his father Bimbisara, one of whose wives was the sister of Prasenajit. Ajatasattu was ultimately pardoned by Prasenajit, who gave him his daughter to wife. His crime, however, weighed on his mind, and he could not sleep, so he visited Buddha at midnight with a great procession of elephants, accompanied by only one male attendant and a great retinue of women, in order to obtain relief of conscience.

The depiction of Ajatashatru during a nighttime visit to Buddha in search of advice from the Enlightened One. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Ajatashatru also met Buddha, but unlike his father, he met the Enlightened One after

he had found enlightenment. Ajatashatru felt guilty for slowly poisoning his father while he was imprisoned and for being the reason behind his demise, so he decided to pay a visit to Buddha and ask for forgiveness. He wanted to be relieved of his suffering. Buddha forgave Ajatashatru, replying to his confession of sin, “Indeed, King, a transgression overcame you when you deprived your father, that good and just king, of his life. But since you have acknowledged the transgression and confessed it as is right, we will accept it. For he who acknowledges his transgression as such and confesses it for betterment in future, will grow in the noble discipline.”

Buddha continued with his sacred teachings in the plains of the river Ganges, teaching noblemen as well as commoners about enlightenment and freedom from suffering for more than twenty years. After two decades of living as an ascetic, Buddha is said to have settled in the Kingdom of Kosala, spending most of his later years in the city of Shravasti.

The number of sangha followers also grew with the influence of Buddha and his spiritual teachings. Sangha refers to an assembly of Buddha’s followers, which included men, women, and children who lived by the spiritual lessons of Buddhism.

Already old and in need of more rest, Buddha began to spread spiritual wisdom to his chief disciples. One of the greatest challenges for Buddha at this point was the rupture between him and his cousin Devadatta, who wanted to take over the role of the spiritual leader. After gathering a group of monks, Devadatta left the sangha and founded a new spiritual sect that would rival the Buddhist sangha. Some sources note that Devadatta plotted and tried to kill Buddha but with no success. Scholars still cannot agree on why Buddha and his cousin disagreed.

The last year of Buddha’s life coincides with one of Ajatashatru’s war campaigns. Ajatashatru led the kingdom of Magadha against Vajji, which was one of the Mahajanapadas. The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, one of the Buddhist scriptures, describes Buddha’s encounter with one of Ajatashatru’s ministers who came to Buddha to ask for his advice regarding the war against the Vajji.

It is important to note that at the time, Buddha lived as a spiritual leader and an ascetic who didn’t conform with regular social and political situations in ancient India. Another important note is that Buddha promoted nonviolence. Instead of giving direct advice, Buddha mentions the Seven Conditions of Welfare, the Sapta Aparihani Dhamma. The Seven Conditions of Welfare that should be incorporated into a Buddhist community are devotion, modesty, conscientiousness, learning, persistent energy, mindfulness, and wisdom.

By proposing this, Buddha didn’t speak against or in favor of the war against the Vajji. He showed compassion for the people of the Vajji even though he didn’t warn them directly about the danger. Buddha intended to buy time for the Vajji, suggesting to Ajatashatru’s chief minister that they should give the Vajjis at least

three years to adopt the Seven Conditions of Welfare.

Shortly after this event, Buddha, who was already old and withering, although his health was noted to improve in the last months of his life, was asked by Ananda to choose his religious successor. Ananda was one of the ten chief disciples of Buddha and is also known as the treasurer of dharma, Buddha's teachings, as he had the best memory of all his disciples. Ananda was often an intermediary between Buddha and the sangha. Buddha explained to his faithful disciple that the order should not have any successors as long as the monks live by dharma.

Although he was already eighty years old, Buddha recovered from his illness and set off to teach and travel with Ananda. On his journey, he met a blacksmith named Cunda, who offered Buddha a meal, which the Enlightened One gratefully accepted. Shortly after having the meal, which would be his last, Buddha got ill once again. Cunda was worried that the meal he offered to Buddha had caused the illness, but Buddha told Ananda that he must convince Cunda that his meal granted him the energy he needed to finish his journey.

Buddha continued to travel and teach even after he got ill until he could no longer move. They had to stop in Kushinagar, a town in Uttar Pradesh, where Ananda had prepared a resting place for his teacher. On his deathbed, Buddha told his disciples that once he was gone, their teachers would be the Dharma-Vinaya, Buddha's teachings. Buddha took his last breath, with his last words being, "All formations decay. Strive for the goal with diligence."

Chapter 5 – Between the Empires of Ancient India

The Mahajanapadas was the dominant coalition in India until 345 BCE.

One of the main factors that led to the disintegration of the Mahajanapadas was the expansion politics of the Magadha kingdom during Bimbisara's reign. Bimbisara's son, Ajatashatru, had an even more aggressive strategy of expanding the kingdom's territory by force. Ajatashatru conquered the kingdoms of Kosala and Vajji and became the most powerful king among the sixteen oligarchic republics.

Ajatashatru was succeeded by his son Udayabhadra, also known to history as Udayin. Udayin ruled between 460 BCE and 444 BCE. Udayin was responsible for his father's death, just as Ajatashatru was the cause of his father's death. However, Udayin wasn't killed by his successor, breaking the tradition of patricide in the Haryanka dynasty.

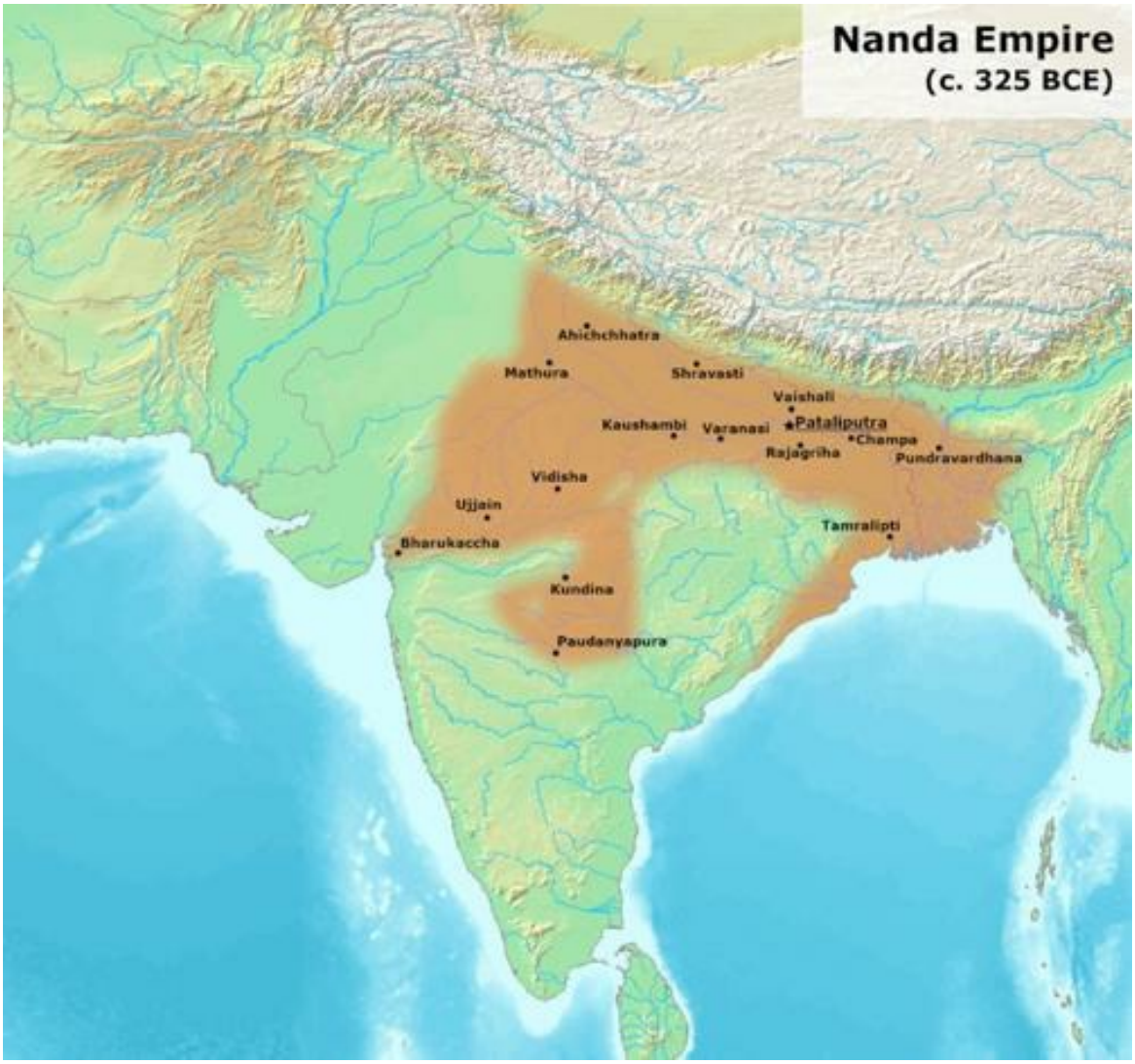
Udayin often battled with the king of the neighboring Avanti, Palaka, and defeated his opponent on numerous occasions. However, Udayin was ultimately killed by Palaka. He was succeeded by Anurudha, whose relationship with Udayin is not clear to historians. It is certain that Udayin had no children. Anurudha probably ruled for only four years, from 444 BCE to 440 BCE, after which he was succeeded by Munda, who ruled from 440 BCE to 437 BCE.

Munda had a son named Nagadasaka, who would become the last ruler of the Haryanka dynasty. He ruled from 437 BCE to 413 BCE. He was deposed, and his minister, Shishunaga, took his place.

The Shishunaga dynasty was named after its founder, Shishunaga. He ruled the largest and most powerful kingdom in North India. Shishunaga was remembered as the king who brought a hundred-year-long conflict between the kingdoms of Avanti and Magadha to an end; he defeated Avanti and made it a territory of Magadha, that way further expanding the kingdom.

Shishunaga ruled until 395 BCE when he was succeeded by Kakavarna, also known as Kalashoka, who was Shishunaga's son. Kakavarna was the second king of the short-lived Shishunaga dynasty, which ended with Kakavarna's son and successor, Nandivardhan. Kakavarna divided the kingdom of Magadha between his ten sons, making his ninth son the heir to the throne.

Nandivardhan was killed by the Nandas, who took over Magadha and formed the Nanda Empire, subduing the Shishunaga dynasty by force and brutality around the mid-4th century BCE.



The Nanda Empire during its last ruler, Dhana Nanda, around 325 BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

According to ancient sources in India, Greece, and Rome, although the name of the Nanda dynasty's founder is unknown, the first king of the Nanda Empire was of low birth. The first king of the Nanda dynasty could have been a barber who got close to the queen and possibly became her lover. The sources credit the barber with good looks, charisma, and intelligence, which aided him in killing the king and later manipulating the queen into perceiving him as a guardian of the young princes who were to inherit their father's throne. After killing the princes, the barber founded the dynasty and became the first ruler of the Nanda Empire.

According to the Puranas, ancient Indian literature, the first ruler of the Nanda Empire and the founder of the Nanda dynasty was the son of the last Shishunaga king, Mahanandin, named Mahapadma Nanda. The name Mahapadma Nanda is translated as "lord of the great lotus."

Buddhist inscriptions, on the other hand, tell the tale of a thief and usurper who killed the last king of Shishunaga. He was later succeeded by his eight brothers, one of whom was the last king of the Nanda Empire, Dhana Nanda. There is no general quorum on the longevity of the Nanda dynasty and its wealthy empire; however, it is likely that the dynasty ended after the second generation of Nanda kings, so it probably spanned from 344 BCE to 321 BCE.

Dhana Nanda is translated as “Wealthy Nanda,” which speaks in favor of all the riches that the Nanda dynasty accumulated during their short reign. The Nanda rulers were not popular among their subjects even though the kingdom was wealthier and more powerful than ever. The reason for both its unpopularity and wealth was a new system of taxation.

According to the tradition and tales of Jain Dharma (Jainism), one of the oldest religions in India, Dhana Nanda wasn’t killed. Rather, he was allowed to leave the kingdom after he was defeated by Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Empire.

Although the lines between myth and fact are blurred when it comes to the Nanda Empire, it eventually ceased to exist, making room for the rise of a new force in ancient India: the Maurya Empire. However, between these two great empires, a new force was preparing to invade the territory of India. Before the Nandas would come to an end in 321 BCE, Alexander the Great would test his military skills and become one of the greatest generals in history.

Chapter 6 – The Invasion of Alexander the Great: The Aftermath of the Pan-Hellenic War

History rarely records such prolific rulers and military generals as Alexander the Great. By the age of thirty, Alexander the Great had more titles than almost any historical figure since the dawn of men. His titles included Basileus of Macedon, Hegemon of the Hellenic League, Strategos Autokrator of Greece, Shahanshah of Persia, Pharaoh of Egypt, and the Lord of Asia.

Alexander III of Macedon was born in 356 BCE and died at the young age of thirty-three in 323 BCE. However, before the end of his glorious days, Alexander the Great would almost become the ruler of the entire known ancient world thanks to his impeccable sense for military strategy and warfare.

Alexander belonged to an old dynasty of noblemen called the Argead. His father was King Philip II of Macedon, who was also an impressive ruler. Since Alexander was destined to rule, he had the finest education. His teacher was Aristotle, a famous polymath and philosopher who founded the Lyceum during the Classical period in ancient Greece.

Alexander inherited the throne when his father was murdered at the wedding of Cleopatra of Macedon in 336 BCE. Cleopatra was the only sibling of Alexander that shared the same parents.

The young king was only twenty years old at the time of his coronation. And in the first year of his rule, Alexander proved he had an extraordinary talent for warfare. He attacked and sacked Thebes, after which he was given the title of the general of Greece.

Two years before King Philip's unexpected and violent death, he had formed a coalition between all the Hellenic states except Sparta. This coalition was called the League of Corinth. This was the first time in the history of ancient Greece that all the Hellenic states managed to unify under a single central authority. Alexander assumed an important position in the league and was soon awarded the title Strategos Autokrator and Hegemon of the Hellenic League.

After proving to be worthy of his titles by smothering the rebellion of the allied states after his father's death, Alexander prepared for a military campaign that would be remembered as one of the greatest and boldest in the ancient world. Alexander was chosen to lead a campaign against the Persian Empire, also known as the Achaemenid Empire.

In 334 BCE, Alexander invaded Persia with a large force, starting a series of conquests and battles that would go on for an entire decade. Before defeating Persia and becoming a Shahanshah, Alexander the Great conquered Asia Minor, Syria, the Levant, Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria. He was relentless and restless. Every goal

Alexander achieved was a new way of surpassing himself.

In 326 BCE, only a year before the Nanda Empire would disintegrate, Alexander the Great fought King Porus after entering the Punjab region. This battle is known to history as the Battle of the Hydaspes.

After defeating Bessus of Bactria, one of the satraps (ministers) of Persia, in 328 BCE, Alexander decided to extend the Alexandrian Empire, which already stretched across Asia Minor and Persia. Before moving on to his next campaign, Alexander married an Iranian princess from Bactria, Roxana, which allowed him to strengthen his relationships with the satraps in Central Asia.

Alexander decided to invade India by crossing the Khyber Pass, located on the border between modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Alexander left behind ten thousand men from his army to secure this area before marching through the Khyber Pass. Alexander and his men headed into Aornos and besieged the fortress that Heracles of myth failed to subdue. Alexander and his army were greatly outnumbered. They were attacked by Hindu clans from the Hindu Kush, which was west of the Himalayas. Still, Alexander the Great won and defeated the Hindu clans, even though it may have been the most difficult victory of all during his campaign east of the Persian Empire.

To penetrate deeper into the Indus Valley, Alexander would have to defeat Porus, who was a king in the Punjab region. If Alexander managed to conquer Porus, he would be the lord of Asia.

Alexander the Great and King Porus

After defeating the Hindu clans from the Hindu Kush, Alexander allied with King Taxiles, another king in the Punjab region. But Alexander faced resistance from King Porus, who ruled the stretch of territory from the Hydaspes (the Jhelum River) and Acesines (the Chenab River).

To face Porus's army and progress farther to the east while maintaining the loyalty of his Indian allies, Alexander needed to cross a monsoon-flooded river: the Hydaspes. Expecting Alexander and his army, Porus already lined some of his forces on the bank of the Hydaspes to prevent Alexander from crossing and getting closer to his capital. Alexander knew that rushing across the river with his entire contingent would mean doom for his troops. That is why he decided to move his army up and down the Hydaspes until he could find a suitable way to cross it.

When Alexander moved upstream, he found an uninhabited island that he could use to bring a part of his army to the other side of the river, which he did with no casualties being taken by the wild river streams.

Alexander ordered one of his generals, Craterus, to stay on the other side of the river with most of the men so that King Porus wouldn't find out about the crossing. If King Porus were to attack Alexander with all of his troops, Craterus was instructed to lead the greater part of the army across the river.

A painting depicting the Battle of the Hydaspes, Charles Le Brun, 17th century. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

While Craterus waited on the other side of the river, Alexander ordered his military officers to cross the river at different locations. Alexander needed to make Porus believe that he was bluffing. Due to Alexander's heavy use of feint maneuvers, Porus eventually decided it was a bluff, which allowed Alexander and his men to cross the river unnoticed.

Porus was a worthy opponent, and as many historians note, the Battle of the

Hydaspes was probably the most challenging conflict that Alexander had to endure to expand farther into India.

At one point, Porus saw through Alexander's intentions and knew that he would try to cross the river. He decided to send his son, also named Porus, to scout the area and report on Alexander's whereabouts. Luckily for Alexander, there was a major storm during the night of the crossing, so it was difficult for the young prince to spot any sign of Alexander. He and a part of his army used small vessels and animal skins filled with hay to get across the restless river.

After Alexander crossed the river, he decided to move the cavalry and archers to the front of the formation. Alexander's troops then faced Porus's son. Alexander ordered his foot archers to shower the younger Porus's army with arrows, after which the cavalry charged full force without a formation. They were followed by the phalanx. Porus's force was destroyed, and the young Porus had another problem as well—his chariot was stuck in the mud, as the soil was damped with water from the rain and storms.

The army at the river was destroyed, and Porus's son was among the casualties. King Porus was informed about the defeat and prepared to defend his territory with all of his forces, even equipping Indian war elephants. Every war elephant had a bed on its back, known as howdahs, that resembled miniature castles. At least three archers and another soldier with a javelin would be stationed on these beds.

Porus himself joined the battle, mounted on his biggest, strongest, and tallest war elephant. His soldiers were all dressed in vibrant clothes; they wore steel helmets and were equipped with maces and massive war axes.

Porus was in the very center of his army's formation, so Alexander decided to attack the cavalry from the right side to break the formation and reach Porus. He sent Dahae archers on horses to the right wing and the Macedon cavalry to the left. The Dahae were an Iranian people from Central Asia who entered into an alliance with Alexander. Alexander charged to the left wing with the Macedon cavalry, while General Coenus attacked from the back.

The Indian cavalry tried to defend themselves but entered into confusion, which resulted in Porus's cavalry fleeing behind the elephants to seek protection against Alexander's fierce attack.

Porus's war elephants brought a lot of damage to Alexander's army, as they tossed soldiers like ragdolls and pierced them with their tusks that were reinforced by steel. Alexander's infantry wasn't giving up or was even discouraged by the havoc that the elephants caused to their lines. They aimed for the elephant riders, known as mahouts. Whenever a mahout was struck down, his elephant would become disoriented, which helped the Macedonian army bring these massive beasts down.

The Indian cavalry didn't retreat, despite the chaos caused by some of the elephants. Instead, they charged at Alexander's cavalry. They were stopped by the foot soldiers, who were known as the pezhetairoi. The pezhetairoi used their shields to make a formation so they could push forward against the confused masses of Indian soldiers, that way aiding the Macedonian cavalry that was attacking from the back.

The Indian forces were already fleeing when Craterus managed to cross the river with the remaining forces kept at bay. Craterus arrived at the battlefield just at the right time to attack Porus's retreating soldiers.

Historians note that Alexander admired Porus when he realized that Porus would rather fight and die than get captured. Porus's military skill and valor appealed to young Alexander, who commanded his ally Taxiles to ask Porus to surrender. Taxiles went on a horse to convey Alexander's message, but Porus was nothing but infuriated once he saw his enemy riding toward him. He threw a spear at Taxiles, and Taxiles had no other choice but to flee. Alexander was determined to send his message, so he sent more messengers to Porus, only to have every one of them return with no success.

Finally, Porus's friend Meroes managed to convince the king to hear Alexander's message. Porus was already tired from battle. He was dehydrated and close to being defeated, so he dismounted his war elephant and asked for some water. Upon quenching his thirst, Porus agreed to be taken to Alexander.

When Alexander asked Porus how he wanted to be treated, Porus famously replied, "As a king would treat another king," probably meaning that he would rather be killed than captured and treated as a vassal or prisoner. Alexander was impressed by the king's reply, so he decided to treat him like the king he was. He decided to let Porus keep his territories and his power. Alexander founded two cities in Porus's territory: Alexandria Nicaea (to celebrate victory) and Bucephalus (Alexander's horse, who died after the battle).

Alexander's "Victory Coin" was minted in Babylon in 322 BCE, the year of Alexander's death. The coin depicts Alexander being crowned by the Hellenistic goddess of victory, Nike, and Alexander attacking Porus, who is mounted on a war elephant. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Alexander the Great and the Nanda Empire: Progressing to the East of India

Alexander fought what might be the greatest and most expensive battle in the history of Macedon. After allowing King Porus to keep his land and the privileges that come with being a king, Alexander decided to move farther to the east. Alexander arrived at the gates of the Nanda Empire, where he would face the last king of Nanda, Dhana Nanda.

Alexander might have won the battle against Porus, but the victory was bittersweet since Porus still did inflict havoc and devastation on Alexander's troops. Due to the numerous troubles that the Macedonian army had to overcome and put up with during the Battle of the Hydaspes, Alexander's army was discouraged, nearly begging their general, king, and leader—Alexander—to go back home instead of progressing farther to the east. Alexander's army wasn't involved in a mutiny in the core sense of the word; they weren't rebelling or threatening to leave their general. Rather, the Macedonian soldiers were convinced that they could not show any more fierceness than they did in the Battle of the Hydaspes. Moreover, many of them missed their families and were homesick. Moreover, the majority of Alexander's army in 326 BCE consisted of Persian forces. Still, Alexander decided to go on, arriving at the river Hyphasis, the modern-day Beas River, just outside the vast Nanda Empire.

Plutarch, the famous Greek philosopher and historian, tells a story about Alexander's desire to cross the Ganges and launch an attack on the Nanda Empire. In his book titled *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch includes details about Alexander's army defying him.

"As for the Macedonians, however, their struggle with Porus blunted their courage and stayed their further advance into India. For having had all they could do to repulse an enemy who mustered only twenty thousand infantry and two thousand horses, they violently opposed Alexander when he insisted on crossing the river Ganges also, the width of which, as they learned, was thirty-two furlongs, its depth a hundred fathoms, while its banks on the further side were covered with multitudes of men-at-arms and horsemen and elephants. For they were told that the kings of the Ganderites and Praesii were awaiting them with eighty thousand horsemen, two hundred thousand footmen, eight thousand chariots, and six thousand fighting elephants. And there was no boasting in these reports. For Androcottus, who reigned there not long afterwards, made a present to Seleucus of five hundred elephants, and with an army of six hundred thousand men overran and subdued all India."

Alexander's army was largely outnumbered, and they were all tired from the previous battle. It seems that the only man in the army of thousands who wanted to

continue marching to the east was Alexander himself.

If the numbers recorded by Plutarch were accurate, Alexander had around forty thousand soldiers. But he was facing over 8,000 chariots, 6,000 war elephants, 200,000 infantry, and 80,000 cavalrymen; the odds were dramatically against the young king of Macedon. It is important to note that the Nanda Empire was extremely wealthy at the time, so these numbers very well could be true.

What Alexander failed to see in his ambition to conquer India and subdue the Nanda Empire was that entering deeper into India meant more dangerous jungles, unfamiliar terrain, and logistics and supply chain difficulties. Besides that, there were no ally forces on the other side of the Indus Valley on which Alexander could rely. All of these factors would make it difficult for Alexander to defeat any small kingdom in India. Nanda was an empire, meaning it was far from being small, weak, or poor.

When Alexander conquered the Persian Empire, it is important to note that the empire was already at its sunset. It had been weakened by a silent rebellion of viziers that were poisoning the rulers, and it was led by an inexperienced leader who came afterward, right at the time when Alexander was preparing his forces to take down the empire.

It is also important to note that compared to the Nanda Empire, Porus's kingdom was small. Porus was also "only" a king, whereas Dhana Nanda was an extremely wealthy emperor. If Porus gave Alexander and his army a hard time, conquering the Nanda Empire would be impossible, especially with an army of forty thousand soldiers.

After realizing that his soldiers opposed the planned attack on the Nanda Empire, Alexander decided that it was time to retreat and give up on his dreams of conquering the wealthy Nandas. Alexander, however, wasn't completely giving up on India, as he wanted to secure the borders of his empire. He moved his men south through Punjab and Sindh.

On his way south, Alexander and his army subdued several Hindu tribes living in the lower banks of the Indus River, which allowed him to secure the borders before turning to the west. Alexander returned to Babylon, where he resided in the palace of the late Nebuchadnezzar II, who died in 562 BCE.

Plutarch describes Alexander's days before his death, recording that the young conqueror spent time with Nearchus, one of Alexander's officers, and Medius of Larissa, also an officer and a personal friend of Alexander. They entertained themselves and drank wine for two days and nights, fourteen days before Alexander's untimely death. After two days of heavy drinking, Alexander became ill. He was so weak that he couldn't even speak; all he could do was lay in his bed. According to another ancient Greek historian, Diodorus, Alexander drank a massive

bowl of wine to honor the great hero Heracles, after which he felt an immense pain that continued to plague him until his death ten days later. Diodorus also theorized that Alexander might have been poisoned, which would be logical given the fact that poisoning wasn't a strange way to get rid of a leader back then. Plutarch, however, disagrees with the theory of poisoning. Scholars today disagree over Alexander's cause of death.

Alexander had no heir. His son, who was named after him, was born to Roxana after his death. Thus, his closest officers and generals had to ask Alexander on his deathbed about his plans for the throne. According to an apocryphal story, Alexander said that he was leaving his empire "to the strongest," translated from the ancient Greek *tôi kratistôi*, which were supposedly his last words. It is argued that he said *tôi Kraterôi*, which would mean "to Craterus," who was his general and the regent of Macedon.

It is likely that Alexander couldn't even speak during his last days on Earth, for the illness or poison that struck him claimed his life in less than two weeks. This is what Plutarch records in his book about Alexander.

Diodorus, on the other hand, claims that Alexander chose Perdiccas, as Alexander gave him his signet ring. Diodorus even claims there were witnesses to confirm the story. Perdiccas was one of Alexander's faithful bodyguards and generals. Perdiccas supposedly wanted Alexander's and Roxana's unborn baby to become the new king if the child was male. Perdiccas, Craterus, Antipater, and Leonnatus would be the child's protectors.

In a way, the battle for power commenced, although perhaps in silence, when Meleager, one of Alexander's military officers, disagreed with the succession arranged by Perdiccas. Meleager instead decided to support Alexander's brother, Philip III Arrhidaeus. With the birth of Alexander's son, Alexander IV, the two sides set their differences aside and decided to support a shared rule between Alexander IV and Philip III.

This bust of Alexander the Great was made by Leochares around 330 BCE. It is located today in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, the Babylonian territories were divided among the satraps, and the battle for power commenced. Perdiccas was assassinated in 321 BCE, shortly after Alexander's death, and the forty-year-long war commenced between Alexander's successors, all of whom had claims to the throne of Macedonia

and its territories won by Alexander the Great.

Once the four-decade war was settled, the Alexandrian Empire was divided into four pillars of power in the Hellenistic world: Ptolemaic Egypt, Attalid Anatolia, Seleucid Mesopotamia and Central Asia, and Antigonid Macedon.

Before his death, Alexander left detailed plans to Craterus, who presented them to Perdiccas. Perdiccas made sure that the Macedonians in Babylon heard the last plans of their now-dead leader. However, the Macedonians refused to conduct Alexander's plans, deeming them extravagant and unnecessary. According to Diodorus, Alexander wanted to invade the Mediterranean and Carthage with one thousand ships and unite people from Europe and Asia by mixing them through migrations to large settlements on the two continents. The plans further described the conquest of Arabia and building a monumental tomb for Alexander's father that would match the great pyramids of Egypt. None of Alexander's plans were conducted after his death. However, his legacy remains. Alexander the Great is still remembered as one of the greatest military generals, leaders, conquerors, and strategists in the history of war and men.

Shortly after Alexander's death, around 322 BCE, major changes were about to take place in India. The Nanda Empire was about to fall, making room for the rise of another great power: the Maurya Empire.

Chapter 7 – The Rise of the Maurya Empire

In 322 BCE, a new power ascended in the plains of the river Ganges.

The same empire that was once too big for Alexander and his army to take on was now under attack. And this battle would bring the king of the Nanda Empire, Dhana Nanda, to his knees.

According to a legend that draws roots from ancient Indian scriptures, Dhana Nanda, the ruler of the wealthy and vast Nanda Empire, offended Chanakya, a prominent Brahmin, in public. The Buddhist version of the legend says that Chanakya was born with canine teeth, which was considered to be a sign of royal origin. His mother feared that he would abandon her once he became king, so Chanakya broke his teeth to calm his mother. One day, Dhana Nanda organized a ceremony for Brahmins, which Chanakya attended. Once Dhana Nanda saw Chanakya, he was so disgusted and offended by his appearance—with his crooked legs, unsightly face, and broken teeth—that he ordered someone to remove Chanakya from the ceremony. Offended by the king's order, Chanakya promised to put an end to his reign and bring down his empire, which he did with his protégé, Chandragupta Maurya.

Another potential successor to the throne was Dhana Nanda's son, Pabbata, whom Chanakya convinced to seize the throne. To test who would be a better fit for the Nanda Empire, Chanakya gave an amulet on a thread to both Chandragupta and Pabbata. One night while Chandragupta was asleep, Chanakya asked Pabbata if he could take off Chandragupta's amulet without cutting the thread or waking him up. After Pabbata failed, Chanakya asked Chandragupta the next night if he could do the same. Chandragupta succeeded, so Chanakya chose him as the next king of the Nanda Empire.

There is little historical evidence to confirm any story wrapped in myth and legend, although it is known that Chanakya did help Chandragupta to become a king and the founder of a new empire. It is more likely that Chandragupta was advised and taught by Chanakya, who utilized the power vacuum that was formed after the death of Alexander the Great. Around 323 BCE, Alexander's empire in Asia was divided into regions and pieced into various satraps in the Greater Punjab area, so Chandragupta decided to conquer and subdue Greek satraps in South Asia, knowing that it would pave the way to conquering the Nanda Empire.

Perhaps the reason there are so many legends surrounding the conquest of the Nanda Empire is that there are few details in Indian scriptures about the end of Nanda or Dhana Nanda that could be fact. What is known is that Chandragupta was of unknown origin, while his ancestors remain a secret hidden in the ancient past.

The majority of written sources on the conquest of the Nanda Empire were written

at least two hundred years after Chandragupta had formed one of the biggest empires in ancient India. Plutarch also wrote about Chandragupta, the decline of Nanda, and the rise of the Mauryan Empire. As Plutarch writes, young Chandragupta might have met Alexander the Great when he was still a teenager at Taxiles's court, where he was taught by his guru, Chanakya. Maybe Chandragupta saw Alexander as the personification of a universal emperor; after all, he had a dream to become one himself, which he later did in his early twenties by forming the Maurya Empire. Many historians argue that Chandragupta might have met Alexander, but there is no factual proof that their encounter ever happened.

According to various Latin, Hellenistic, and Indian sources, Chandragupta was determined to bring the Nanda Empire down so he could subdue all of South Asia and establish a firm hold over the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Chandragupta Maurya commenced his conquest by first subduing and raiding the surrounding settlements, villages, and regions. Afterward, Chandragupta hired Hindu mercenaries and decided to go for the center of power in the Nanda Empire, targeting the capital of Pataliputra. There, he killed his father, and the rest is, well, history.

Chanakya played an important role in these conquests, as he taught Chandragupta everything he knew about politics, making alliances, wars, and statesmanship. After conquering the Nanda Empire, Chandragupta founded a new empire in 321 BCE while securing the borders to the west and continuing with his expansion politics.

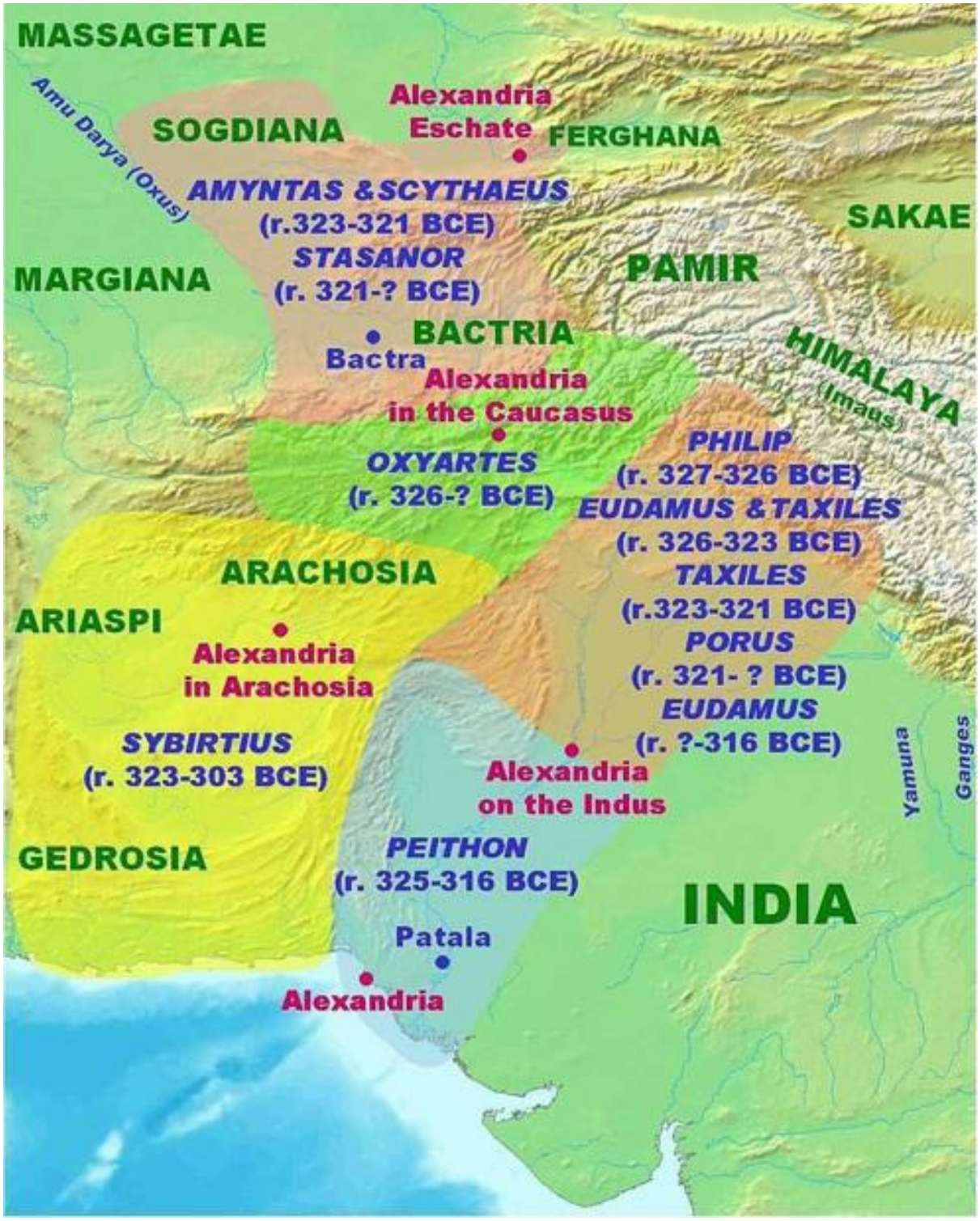
Chandragupta the Unifier, Chanakya, and the Maurya Empire: Politics, Organization, and Management

One of the greatest legacies of Chanakya, also known as Kautilya in many ancient sources, was the *Arthashastra*. The *Arthashastra* is an ancient scripture about politics, statecraft, economy, and military strategy that contains important lessons and collected knowledge Chanakya had imparted to Chandragupta. Chandragupta used the *Arthashastra* to manage and organize his empire, which was the largest central power that had been known at this point in India.

Chanakya placed a major emphasis on recruiting spies in the name of the king so that the ruler would always be aware of what was being talked about among his courtiers, subjects, and neighboring kingdoms. The logistics of running a network of spies is described in the book in detail, and it includes background checks and the screening of ministers.

The name of the book, *Arthashastra,* can be translated as “the science of wealth” or even “science of political economy.” The treatise touches on many subjects, though, such as the market and trading, economy, law, ethics, and war theories. It also explores the subject of nature, peace, medicine, animals, agriculture, and diplomacy. The book includes strategies for questions of social welfare, advising the king about actions he should take in case of famine, natural disasters, and other cases of misfortune. For example, in case a natural disaster strikes or the empire is affected by famine, the king should absolve those who are affected from paying taxes. Moreover, the king should start a public project, which would show the people that their leader was still in control and very much potent. Public projects could be building forts, aqueducts, irrigation systems, or similar constructions that would keep any chaos or mutiny at bay amidst crises.

After the Maurya Empire was founded, Chanakya naturally became Chandragupta’s chief minister. With the help and guidance of Chanakya, Chandragupta captured numerous Indian territories from Greek satraps who were appointed after Alexander the Great’s death. Chandragupta even killed some of the satraps to show his dominance over the Indo-Gangetic Plain. By 317 BCE, all the Macedonian satraps had been removed from Indian territories or executed by the king of Maurya.



The Indian subcontinent, 317 BCE. By this point, Chandragupta had wrested the Indian territories from the Macedonian satraps. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Five years later, in 312 BCE, Seleucus I Nicator came on the political scene of ancient India. He posed a threat to Chandragupta's Maurya Empire, as his newly founded kingdom was facing the empire from its eastern border. Nicator was

already familiar with the terrain of the Indian subcontinent, having been one of the generals of Alexander the Great. He was also one of many friends, family members, and generals who fought over the throne of the Alexandrian Empire. A decade after Alexander's death, Nicator formed a new Hellenistic power center in India called the Seleucid Empire. The empire stretched to Mesopotamia and Syria, also taking most of Asia Minor and the Iranian Plateau.

For a bit of background, Nicator gave his support to Perdiccas after Alexander's death in 323 BCE. However, after a mutiny against Perdiccas erupted due to his failure to subdue Ptolemy in Egypt, Nicator conspired with two other generals, Antigenes and Peithon. They killed Perdiccas in 321 BCE. While Antipater (one of Alexander's generals) became the regent of the Macedonian kingdom, Nicator was given the title of Babylonian satrap. However, the shift of power swiftly changed the situation, as Antigonus, perhaps the most powerful Macedonian general at the time, claimed the throne as the new regent, and Nicator didn't have many options but to flee and leave Babylon.

Nicator couldn't return to his power center until 312 BCE, which was when he formed his empire in South Asia. He gradually took the title of Chiliarch, Shahanshah of Persia, Lord of Asia, and, pretentiously, the King of the Universe.

Chandragupta didn't face Nicator directly in a war until 305 BCE. This war is known to history as the Seleucid-Mauryan War. The Hellenistic world and ancient India were clashing yet again.

The war would go on for two years, but sadly, details about the Seleucid-Mauryan War are scarce. What is known to history is that Nicator wanted to win over the remaining satraps who once belonged to the Macedonians. At one point during the war, Nicator crossed the river Indus. It is not clear where the first battle of the war took place due to the lack of information, but it is certain that Seleucus I Nicator faced a wild river with a hostile empire waiting on the other side.

The war ended in 303 BCE with a treaty between the Mauryan Empire and the Seleucid Empire. The treaty was also strengthened with a political marriage. Seleucus gave the hand of his daughter, Helena, to Chandragupta, which allowed Helena to become a Mauryan princess. However, the mother of the king's successor wasn't Helena; that honor belonged to Durdhara. Chandragupta had another wife, as polygamy was customary and a part of the monarchial tradition in ancient India. There are no details on the lineage of Durdhara or her life, except for the information that Durdhara gave birth to the heir of the throne, Bindusara.

Along with giving his daughter's hand to Chandragupta, Seleucus Nicator also gave up the provinces in the far east of his empire. In return, Chandragupta became his ally and gave him five hundred war elephants, which would help Seleucus in his long war between Alexander's generals and family members who were fighting over

his territories.

Chandragupta continued his expansionist politics after 302 BCE, as he now had a valuable ally keeping the borders between the two empires stable and secure. The Mauryan king extended his empire to the southern parts of India and the Deccan Plateau.

When almost the entire Indian subcontinent was unified, Chandragupta and his chief minister Chanakya began making reforms in politics and the economy. Chandragupta created a strong central authority, which resided in the capital of his empire, Pataliputra. He ruled with a council of ministers, with Chanakya, of course, acting as the chief minister. This central authority ruled over the entire empire, which was divided into janapadas (territories). Each territory was protected and secured with forts.

The administration was layered, as Chandragupta employed tax collectors, spies, jurors, councilors, and even law officers, which would have been similar to modern-day police officers. Chandragupta's law officers were supposed to keep law and order across the empire; this is why the crime rate was extremely low. The empire also had an administration for agriculture, cities, and the military. Each worked simultaneously to keep the empire running smoothly.

In the religious realm, Chandragupta frequently organized sacrifices following Vedic tradition and Brahmin rituals. He also planned religious festivals, which would include processions with horses and elephants throughout the capital.

Chandragupta would rarely leave the palace. Chanakya was aware of the dangers of being king, and he knew that potential assassins could try to kill Chandragupta. To keep the king safe, Chanakya created strategies to protect him. Chandragupta was allowed to publicly attend sacrifices and ritual ceremonies. He could also leave the safety of his court for important government business and war campaigns. Chandragupta would often change his bedroom, which was supposed to set possible assassins off the king's trail. Chanakya even made sure to keep Chandragupta safe from court conspiracies; whenever the king would go on a hunting trip, he would be sent with a special unit comprised of all-female guards. Female guards were considered less likely to engage in court intrigue. When Chandragupta would attend a religious ceremony, though, he would be surrounded by male guards.

The king's safety was a top priority, but so was the economy of the Maurya Empire. Chandragupta built numerous water tanks, irrigation systems, temples, and roads to ensure that the entire population could get food and other supplies. The king also used these roads to send supplies to the forces that were far from home. This practice would become one of Chandragupta's many legacies, as other successors to the throne would consider it a standard.

The empire depended greatly on trading, and Chandragupta created trading

networks, manufacturing centers, and wider roads that were more suitable for transporting goods in carts. There is evidence of multiple miles-long highways leading in and out of the empire to Nepal, Taxila, Dehradun, Odisha, Mirzapur, Kapilavastu, Karnataka, and Andhra. The capital of Pataliputra and Taxila were directly connected with a thousand-mile-long highway, which was used for commerce, travel, and postal transportation. The highway was known as Uttarapatha.

It is somewhat peculiar that there is not much evidence of art and elaborate architecture in the Maurya Empire. Archaeologists have not been able to find many remains of art except for scriptures that were mostly written by Chanakya and Megasthenes. Megasthenes was a Greek historian and an ambassador of Seleucus I Nicator. He lived at Chandragupta's court, serving as an Indian ethnographer. Megasthenes wrote a book about his exploration of India called *Indica* (also referred to as *Indika*). The original scripture is lost; however, some fragments were retrieved by archaeologists.

The Abdication and Death of Chandragupta

Chandragupta's son, Bindusara, was coronated in 297 BCE, which is the year that historians take as the year of Chandragupta's abdication. It wasn't unusual for monarchs of ancient India to abdicate the throne and let their successor rule in their stead. If that happened, it was customary for the abdicated king to turn to an ascetic way of life, which was the case for Chandragupta's abdication as well.

There is not much evidence as to why Chandragupta decided it was time for him to step down after ruling for twenty-four years. According to a legend that is deeply rooted in Jainism, which was Chandragupta's religion, the king had sixteen dreams that brought nightmares during his days. He dreamed of a famine that would last for twelve years, the morale of his people decreasing, and the loss of strategically and historically important territories. All of this havoc would be brought to Maurya because of the violence Chandragupta had inflicted during his conquests.

So, according to Jain tradition, after having these dreams and wishing to redeem for his past as an imperialistic conqueror, Chandragupta decided to abdicate and make his son, Bindusara, the king to the vast Maurya Empire. There are little to no records of Chandragupta's days as an ascetic monk, but it is known that Chandragupta died during meditation. At the time, he was ritually starving himself to death, a practice known as Sallekhana.

Perhaps the greatest monument to Jainism from the first years of the Maurya Empire is the Chandragupta basadi, which was built in honor of Chandragupta. A basadi is a Jain temple, and it is similar in style to Hindu and ancient Buddhist temples. The Chandragupta basadi is located on Chandragiri Hill in the Indian state of Karnataka.

The Chandragupta basadi, supposedly built by Chandragupta Maurya and located on Chandragiri Hill. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Chandragupta is still remembered as the great unifier of Indian states and kingdoms, as well as the founder of one of the largest and most powerful empires ever established in the Indian subcontinent.

Chapter 8 – The Maurya Dynasty and Life in the Maurya Empire

It is believed that Chandragupta abdicated in favor of his son Bindusara in 297 BCE. There is not much detail on Bindusara's life, as most of the information that is known about the second king of Maurya comes from sources written a thousand years after Bindusara's rule. Other sources related to Bindusara are mostly veiled in legends and myths. Bindusara was overshadowed by his father's fame and later by his son's achievements, which probably did not help matters either.

Bindusara: “The Strength of the Drop”

Even though Durdhara is considered to be Bindusara’s mother according to the Jain tradition, there is a possibility that Bindusara is half Greek Macedonian, as his mother might have been Helena of Seleucus. However, there is no proof that would testify in favor of this theory, as the only source that talks about Bindusara’s origins claim that Durdhara is his mother.

One of the most famous legends about Bindusara talks about how the young prince got his name. Chanakya, Chandragupta’s chief minister and guru, used to take great care in protecting his king against potential poisoning, knowing that conspiracies could often put an end to a king’s life. That is why Chanakya used to put small doses of various poisons in Chandragupta’s food. One day, while the king’s wife, Durdhara, was pregnant, the king decided to share his meal with his wife, not knowing that his portion contained poison. The queen was only seven days from the predicted day of delivery. As she ate a morsel that had poison in it, Chanakya realized that the queen was going to die in moments. Durdhara collapsed, already dying in front of her husband, and Chanakya shared what had happened and offered to save the baby while he still could.

He decapitated the dead queen with a sword and cut her womb open to get the baby out. He noticed that a drop of poison had touched the baby’s head. This is how Bindusara got his name. When translated from Sanskrit, bindu means “drop.” Bindusara as a whole means “the strength of the drop.”

To keep the baby alive until he was supposed to be born, Chanakya ordered a goat to be killed and cut open so he could place the baby inside. After seven days, Bindusara was born again.

Bindusara ruled from the abdication of his father in 297 BCE to either 272 BCE or 270 BCE. Taranatha, a Tibetan historian who lived between the 16th and 17th centuries, wrote about Bindusara’s conquest hundreds of years later. Taranatha writes that Chanakya defeated sixteen lords in the surrounding territories of the Maurya Empire, which extended the empire’s borders to the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. However, many historians argue that it was his father, Chandragupta, who conquered these territories and that Bindusara only retained them.

Bindusara had three sons: Sushima, Ashoka, and Vigatashoka. According to legend, though, Bindusara had 101 sons and 16 wives; of course, it is highly unlikely he fathered so many children. Ashoka and Vigatashoka are said to have been born by the same mother. According to the Indian scripture about Ashoka, the *Ashokavadana*, Bindusara didn’t like Ashoka, as Ashoka had limbs that were “hard to the touch.”

This text states that Ashoka’s mother was Subhadrangi, also known as Damma or

Dharma. She was of modest origin but had a Brahmin background. She was so beautiful that all the other king's wives became instantly jealous of her. When Subhadrangi's father presented her to the king, Bindusara was astonished, but his wives insisted that he keep her as a royal barber.

Bindusara was impressed by her skills as a hairdresser, but he was even more impressed with her beauty. After Bindusara learned that she had a Brahmin background (he was a follower of Brahminism himself), he decided to make her his wife.

As the *Mahavamsa* (a chronicle of Sri Lanka) tells it, Ashoka wasn't supposed to inherit the throne. In fact, King Bindusara had appointed his eldest son, Sushima, to be his successor. According to one of many legends covering the circumstances around the succession of the empire, Ashoka was appointed as the viceroy of Ujjain. Once he heard of his father's death, he rushed back to the capital of Pataliputra and killed ninety-nine of his brothers, including the eldest, leaving only the brother with whom he shared the same mother.

Another story suggests that Sushima was, once again, the favorite son and proclaimed heir of Bindusara. Sushima liked to show his dominance among the court officials and king's ministers. On one occasion, he threw a weapon at one of the ministers, whose name was Khallataka. Khallataka was so enraged by Sushima's outburst that he deemed him unfit to be the king and demanded the royal council of five hundred to vote and appoint Ashoka as the new emperor.

The major twist in the story was that Khallataka also shared with the council that Ashoka was predicted to be a great universal emperor. This was apparently a premonition by the devatas, female and male spirits that represent the counterparts of someone's soul according to many religions originating from India.

Bindusara was still alive, though, and he wanted to abdicate and let his eldest son rule the empire. When the council shared its decision to appoint Ashoka as the new emperor, Bindusara wasn't happy with their choice, as he wanted Ashoka to become the governor of Takshashila. While Bindusara was arguing that Ashoka shouldn't be the emperor, he died. However, he was alive long enough to witness the devatas appearing in front of him, as if by miracle, and coronating Ashoka as the new king.

Once Sushima heard the news, he rushed to the capital of Pataliputra from Takshashila, where the council had sent him. He intended to claim his right to the throne.

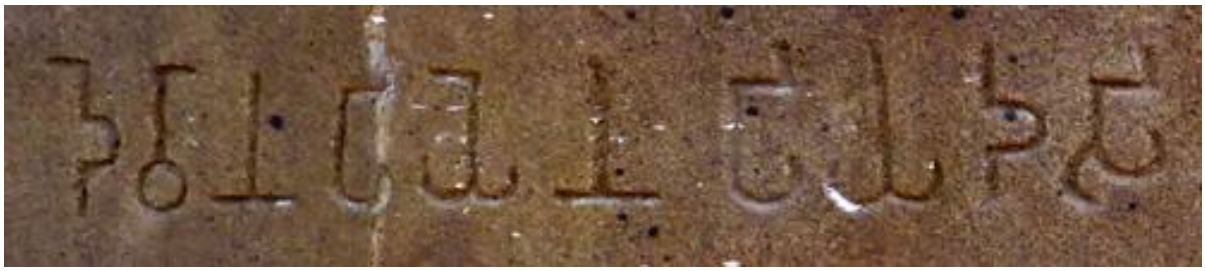
However, Radhagupta, Khallataka's son, tricked Sushima and stopped him from getting to the royal palace. Instead, Radhagupta sent him to a pit of burning coal, where he died. Ashoka became the third emperor of the great Maurya Empire, and he would become just as famous as his grandfather, Chandragupta, in the years to come.

As far as Bindusara’s death, he might have died around 270 BCE, while other historians suggest that he died in 272 BCE.

Ashoka the Great: “Beloved of the Gods”

Ashoka, also known as Ashoka the Great, is one of the most celebrated monarchs in the history of India. He was coronated in 268 BCE and ruled until 232 BCE. When translated from Sanskrit, the name Ashoka means “without sorrow.” The legend from the *Ashokavadana* notes that he was given the name by his mother, whose sorrows were all swept away when he was born.

Ashoka also had the royal name Priyadasi, meaning “a man of grace,” as well as the title of Devanampriya Piyadasi, which translated from Sanskrit means “beloved of the gods” or “the one who treats people kindly.” What is interesting about the name, life, and character of Ashoka is that he was completely unknown to history until a British historian named James Prinsep discovered evidence of his existence in 1837, more than two thousand years after Ashoka’s death. Once Ashoka was identified, he was soon attested as one of the greatest monarchs in the history of ancient India and beyond.



Devanampriya Piyadasi, one of Ashoka’s titles, found on the Lumbini pillar. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Ashoka wasn’t always regarded as “humane” and “kind,” even though some of his titles imply this. According to Taranatha, at the beginning of Ashoka’s reign, he was known as Kamashoka, which roughly translated means “the one who seeks pleasure.” Later, he was called Chandashoka, which means “Ashoka the fierce,” as he performed several cruel acts. One such cruel deed was described in the legends of Ashoka. After Ashoka ascended the throne, he wanted to test his ministers’ loyalty to him. He ordered them to cut every plant and tree bearing fruit or flower. When the ministers failed to complete the task, he decapitated all five hundred of them.

Although the story is exaggerated, as is often the case with legends and myths, there are many stories that testify to Ashoka’s cruelty. One of these stories involves Radhagupta, who became Ashoka’s prime minister. Radhagupta wanted to keep the king unsullied by all the killings he had committed since he was coronated, so he decided to find someone who would do these deeds for the king. Radhagupta found a boy who was later known as Chandagirika, meaning “Girika the fierce,” who tortured and killed people instead of the king. Ashoka supposedly ordered his men to build a prison that had a marvelous exterior but held blood and gore within its

pretty walls.

All of these stories of Ashoka's cruel deeds might be an exaggeration. By doing this, writers could present Buddhism as a transforming and noble religion that managed to change Ashoka's evil ways and convert him into a kind man and beloved king.

But before Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, the king was focused on warfare and conquests. He had his sights set on the flourishing kingdom of Kalinga.

Ashoka pillar found in Vaishali, Bihar, India, built by King Ashoka of Maurya around 250 BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Kalinga was once a part of the Nanda Empire, but it gained its autonomy with the fall of the empire in 321 BCE, which was also the time when the Maurya Empire

was founded. Kalinga had an elaborate art milieu, and the people of Kalinga were known for being a peaceful nation. They had no conflicts with other states, and no war campaigns were led by their king, Mahodadhi Pati, which is translated as “the lord of the seas.” This was a suitable title for the Kalinga king, given the fact that the kingdom had a strong and well-equipped navy.

What bothered Ashoka was the fact that the Kalinga king had an elaborate network of trading outposts and that he controlled the coastline since the kingdom was connected to the Bay of Bengal. With such a network, the Kalinga king, if he so willed, could cut communication between the capital of Maurya and the rest of central India. Thus, Ashoka prepared for a war campaign that would lead to the start of the Kalinga War in 261 BCE, around seven years after Ashoka came to the throne.

Before attacking and leading his military toward the Kalinga kingdom, Ashoka sent a message to the king, demanding him to submit to the Maurya Empire. The king didn’t want to bow to Ashoka, which meant only one thing to Ashoka: war.

Ashoka was determined to win the war against Kalinga since it would be his first major conquest. So, he brought a large army equipped with the very best weaponry that Maurya had at its disposal. The Maurya Empire was vast and wealthy, and all the odds spoke in favor of Ashoka winning the war. However, the people of Kalinga cherished their independence so much that they put up a strong and vigorous defense.

The people of Kalinga showed their fierceness in the fight to defend their autonomy and the borders of their kingdom. Ashoka’s determination to win and subdue Kalinga took over 250,000 lives on both sides. Many people of Kalinga died from wounds soon after the war, so the casualties were even greater than that. As far as the 250,000 casualties go, the Kalinga War is so far the deadliest in Indian history.

Ashoka was forced to face the horrors he had wrought. Children wandered alone, trying to find the bodies of their dead parents. Crippled soldiers attempted to drag themselves from the field of battle, while widows desperately looked for their husbands’ bodies. It all came crashing down on Ashoka, and he started to blame himself for it all. Even though Maurya had won, the king of Maurya felt like he had lost.

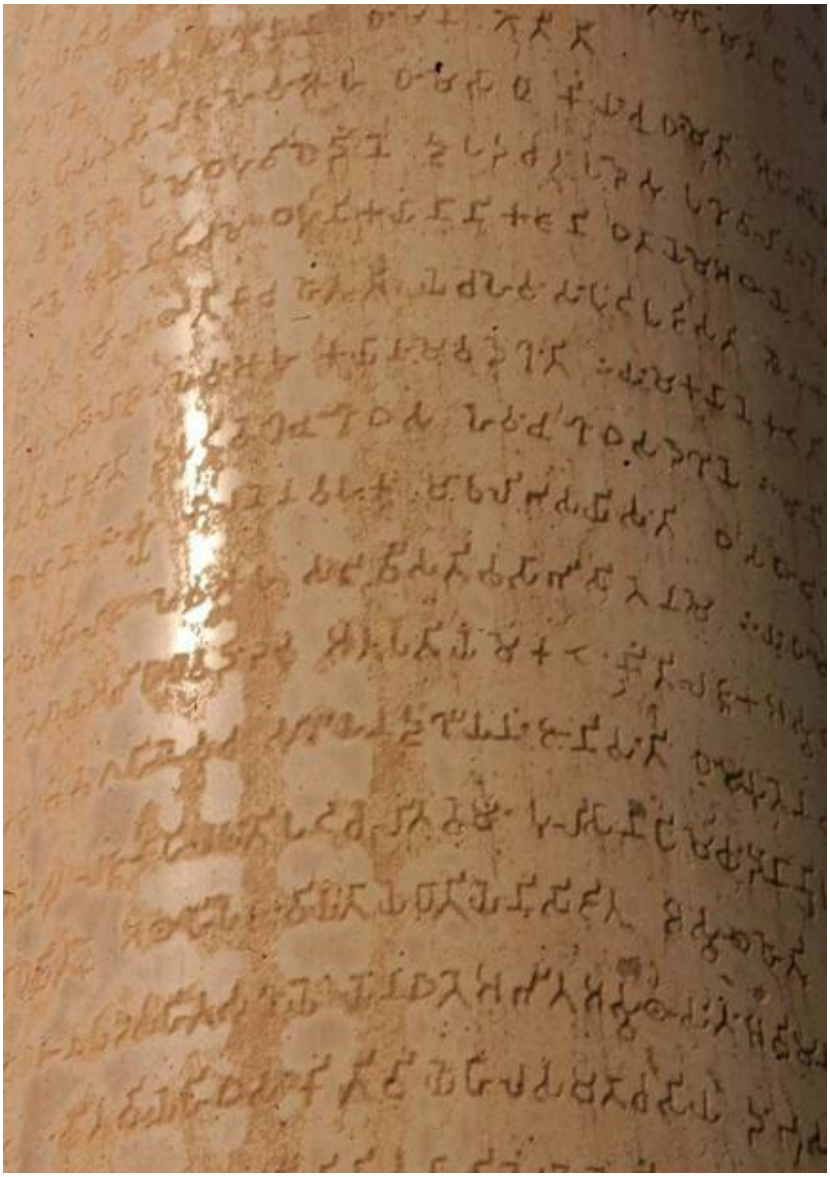
He decided to take a path of nonviolence and turned to Buddhism, which meant that all war campaigns ceased at once. The remaining days of Ashoka’s rule were filled with peace and prosperity. Harmony would prevail in the Maurya Empire for nearly four decades.

According to Buddhist tradition, during his reign, Ashoka built over eighty-four thousand Buddhist temples and monasteries. The number of temples is a product of exaggeration; scholars claim that later inscriptions attributed old temples and

monasteries to Ashoka in an attempt to show his devotion to Buddhism. The Buddhist tradition also tells a story of Ashoka finding and collecting most of the relics of Gautama Buddha, which he kept in the temples and monasteries.

The Great Stupa of Sanchi is attributed to King Ashoka. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site today. Credit: Biswarup Ganguly, Wikimedia Commons.

Ashoka's edicts speak in favor of his path to Buddhism and Dharma (Dhamma). These were written on pillars, caves, and boulders across the Maurya Empire and Indian subcontinent. There are Major and Minor Edicts, which were divided, deciphered, and categorized by historian James Prinsep. The first edicts were written on stones, probably around the tenth year of Ashoka's rule. One such edict is positioned at the border with the Hellenistic kingdoms and territories in India, and the inscription on the stone testifies that it might have been created at least two years after Ashoka returned from Kalinga.



Major Pillar Edict, inscription on a column, Bihar, India. Credit: Sachin Kumar Tiwary, Wikimedia Commons.

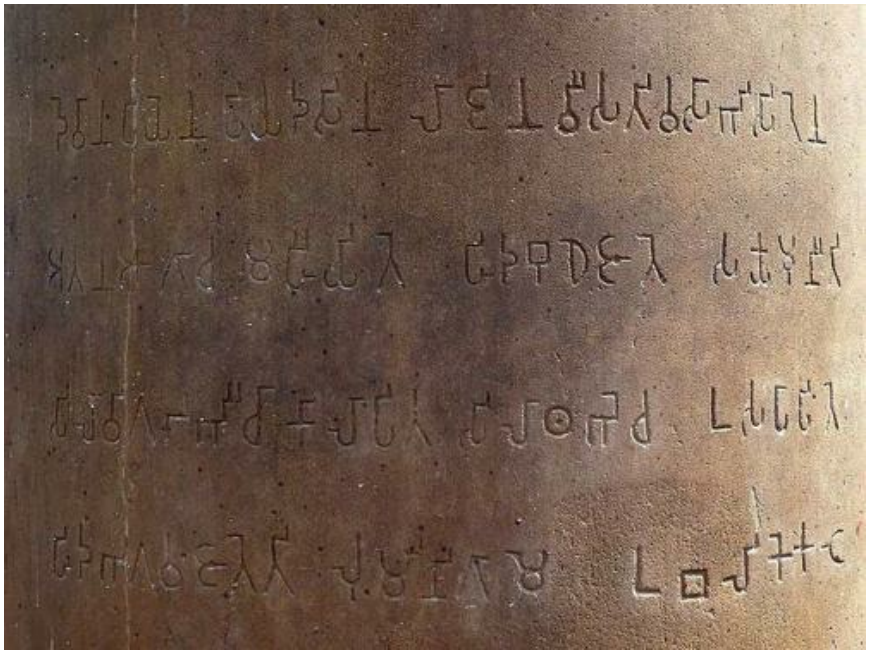
The edicts were made by Ashoka and spoke about Buddhism, Buddha, Dharma, and Ashoka himself. The main purpose of these pillars and stones was to bring these teachings to a wider audience. These edicts were meant to be seen by everyone, and they preached about morality, kindness, generosity, and other virtues that would pass the spirit of Buddhism.

Many of Ashoka's edicts tell stories about the king's generosity and kindness and all the ways he took care of his subjects, human and animal alike. Ashoka is presented as a person who had a change of heart. He had kindness not only for the people of Maurya but also for the people beyond his borders. Ashoka supposedly even shared medical treatments and knowledge with other kingdoms and regions and generally

cared about the welfare of all people.

Ashoka would send officers to check on the welfare of the people and respond to their needs. These officers were known as Mahamatras, which means “officers of the faith.” Ashoka’s edicts state that these officers were anointed by the king himself to advocate for morality and help others who were suffering.

Another significant edict was found in Lumbini, Nepal, the supposed birthplace of Buddha. As the edict proclaims, King Ashoka came to Lumbini two decades after his conversion to Buddhism and his famous change of heart. He erected a pillar bearing an edict about Buddha’s birth to mark the spot where the Blessed One, as he addresses Buddha, began his life on Earth. To bless the people of Lumbini, Ashoka exempted them from taxes and asked only for an eighth of their yearly crops.



The Pillar Edict in Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, was erected by Ashoka twenty years after the Kalinga War. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Kalsi rock edict tells a story about Ashoka’s new conquests, conquests that were not achieved by steel and armies but rather with Dharma and the path to enlightenment. The Kalsi rock inscription, located in Dehradun District, mentions Greek kings, including Alexander of Epirus, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedon, Ptolemy II of Egypt, Magas of Cyrene, and Antiochus II Theos of Syria. Officers of the Buddhist faith were sent to their kingdoms as ambassadors. Whether these ambassadors were received by the Hellenistic kings is not mentioned in the edict. However, it is certain that ancient Greek philosophers presented Indian thought and philosophy to contemporary thinkers and polymaths.

Excavation of the Lumbini pillar, revealing the inscription at the bottom, 1896, Alois Anton Führer, British Library. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

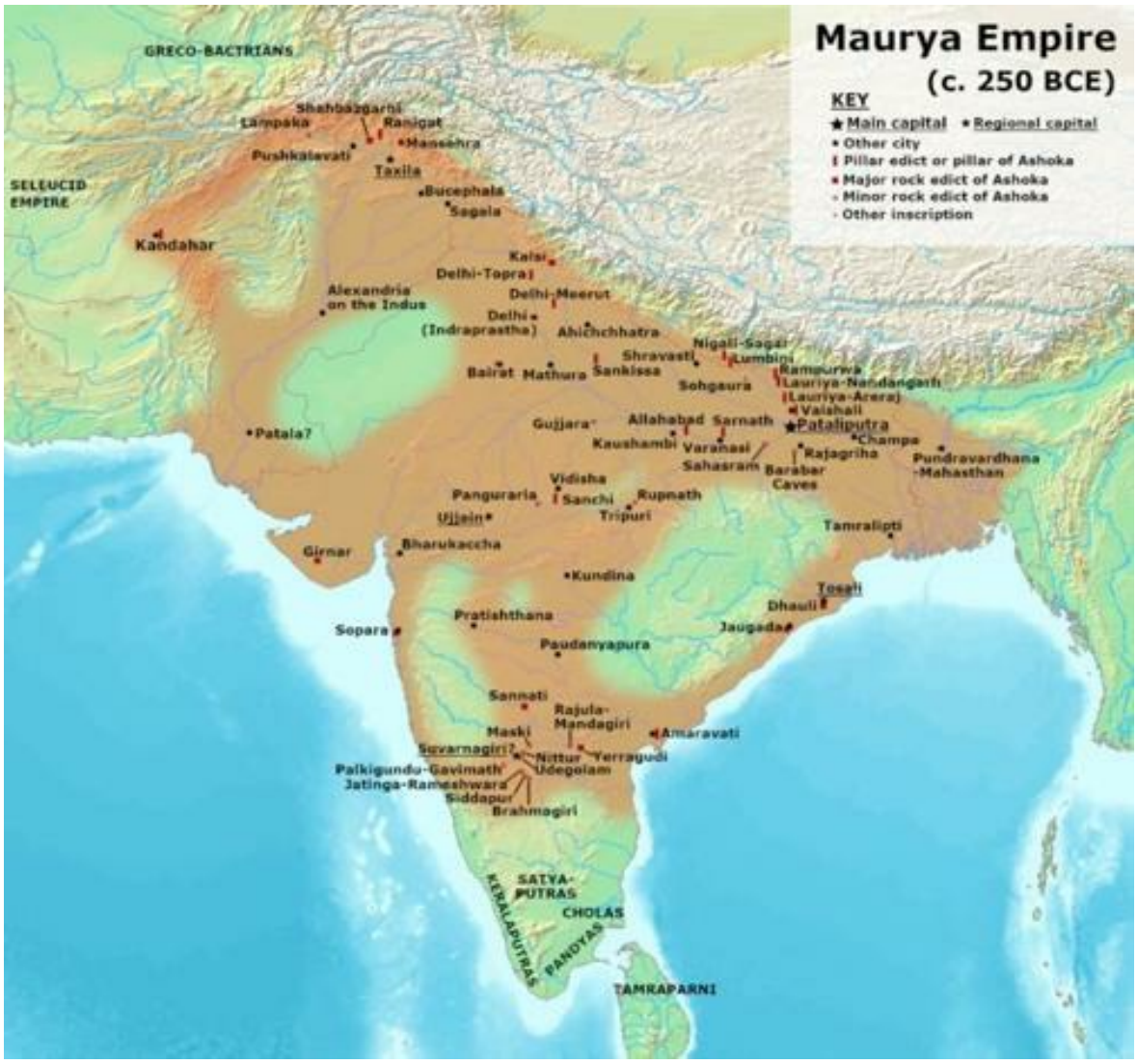
Despite Ashoka's efforts and monumental endeavors to implement Buddhism in the Maurya Empire and beyond to the Greek states and kingdoms, he didn't manage to convert even a majority of his population. Most of the people inhabiting the Mauryan Empire weren't Buddhists, and they weren't willing to convert to Buddhism.

The *Arthashastra* says a strong kingdom can only be ruled by a strong king. A strong king needs to consider what is in the best interest of the majority of his people and should not indulge in his own desires. Ashoka wanted to maintain the image of a strong king according to this philosophy, so he wouldn't implement Buddhism as the state religion. Ashoka's emissaries spread his decree that

everyone’s religion should be respected and that no man should place his religion over someone else’s. This thought perfectly illustrated the religious milieu in the Maurya Empire, as there were religious clans of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Jainism, Ajivikism, Greek polytheism, and Buddhism.

However, despite the image of peace and kindness, Ashoka was still fierce even after his conversion to Buddhism. According to the *Ashokavadana*, he is said to have tortured Chandagirika to death in his prison, which was called Ashoka’s Hell. You might recall that Chandagirika was Ashoka’s chief executioner who tortured people in the king’s stead, but he eventually became the victim due to his cruel ways. Ashoka also punished sixteen thousand heretics, slaying them for the misconduct of only one non-Buddhist who drew Buddha bowing to another deity. Still, many scholars argue that these stories are a figment of imagination made by rivaling religious cults who wanted to show Ashoka as a cruel and immoral ruler.

Ashoka’s pillar in Vaishali, Bihar, India. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.



The largest extent of the Maurya Empire during Ashoka's reign, around 250 BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Ashoka's death was not mentioned in any of the edicts, but the last edict was erected in his twenty-sixth regnal year.

After ruling for nearly forty years, Ashoka died, leaving the throne to his grandson, as none of his sons could ascend the throne in his stead. His son Kunala was blind, another son named Mahendra was spreading Buddhism across the empire and beyond, and there is not much information about Jalauka. Ashoka's favorite son, Tivala, who was the father of Ashoka's successor, Dasharatha, died before Ashoka.

The only story concerning Ashoka's death is found in the Sri Lankan tradition, claiming that the king died in 232 BCE. According to the story, Ashoka became very ill, and he started donating funds from the empire's treasury until his ministers prohibited donations to the sanghas and monks. The king then began to donate his possessions. Royal ministers had to find a way to prevent him from doing this.

Dying and ill, Ashoka only had half of a myrobalan fruit left, which he gave to monks as his final donation.

Myrobalan fruit, Phyllanthus emblica*. Credit: Prathyush Thomas.*

The story of Ashoka's last days is considered a fabrication to show Ashoka in the best possible light and to emphasize the importance of giving.

After Ashoka's prosperous reign, which lasted for almost four decades, the kingdom slowly began its decline. The great and vast Maurya Empire would fall in the next fifty years, and with it, Ashoka's pillars and legacy would be buried in the sand for centuries.

Dasharatha and the Last Kings of Maurya

Dasharatha inherited the throne from his grandfather in 232 BCE, and he tried to follow his grandfather's steps and continue his legacy. Dasharatha attempted to keep the empire together after Ashoka's death, but his efforts were in vain.

The first one to interrupt the political unity of the Maurya Empire was Dasharatha's uncle, Jalauka. Jalauka founded an independent kingdom in Kashmir, located in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Some historians point out that Dasharatha already shared the throne of the Maurya Empire with Kunala, thus dividing the empire. Dasharatha also started to lose provinces in the northwest, while one of the nobles, Virasena, became the self-proclaimed king of Gandhara, one of the long-disestablished sixteen Mahajanapadas. Kalinga also departed from the empire, while some of Dasharatha's governors sought autonomy for their appointed territories and regions.

The empire was steadily losing its territorial vastness, and the new king of Maurya was losing his political relevance in the wider region of the Indian subcontinent.

Dasharatha was succeeded by Kunala's son, Samprati, in 224 BCE. Samprati was born and raised in the region of Ujjain, where Ashoka had once been appointed as a governor. Ashoka was still alive when Kunala came with Samprati to Pataliputra to claim his right to the throne. Ashoka supposedly replied that he couldn't make Kunala the king because he was blind. According to some sources, particularly in Jain tradition, Kunala was not born blind; he had been blinded as a result of a cruel conspiracy to rob him of his right to the throne. Regardless, Ashoka promised that Samprati would become the king after Dasharatha.

Samprati proved to be another great Mauryan monarch, as he managed to retrieve some of the provinces that had departed during Dasharatha's reign.

Unlike his grandfather Ashoka, Samprati spread the word and influence of Jainism across the empire. The Jain tradition credit Samprati as the patron of Jain monks, and he is also credited for rebuilding numerous temples and erecting statues of idols across the Maurya Empire.

Samprati was succeeded by his son, Shalishuka, who reigned from 215 BCE to 202 BCE. A Puranic Sanskrit text mentions Shalishuka as an unforgiving and unrighteous ruler, but not much is known about him and his regnal years. The relationship between Shalishuka and his successor Devavarman is not completely clear, although it is likely that they were father and son. Devavarman isn't described as cruel or unrighteous, but he is attributed with weakness during his seven years of ruling.

Devavarman was succeeded by Shatadhanvan in 195 BCE, who ruled until 187 BCE when he was succeeded by Brihadratha.

Brihadratha would be the last king of the Maurya Empire, and he ruled for three brief years. Puranic sources claim that the last king of Maurya ruled for seven years, ending his reign in 180 BCE.

Brihadratha was killed in a conspiracy set by his general, Pushyamitra Shunga, in 184 BCE. An Indian poet from the 7th century named Banabhatta writes that Pushyamitra wanted to show the king the extent of his army. While the army was marching in all its glory, Pushyamitra killed the king in front of everyone and claimed the throne. Pushyamitra Shunga then founded a new ruling dynasty that would control Magadha.

The Indian subcontinent would never see another empire that could compare to the vastness and power of the Maurya Empire.

Chapter 9 – Life in Ancient India: The People of India from the Indus Valley Civilization to the Maurya Empire

Amidst great wars, conquests, and battles for power, the average person in ancient India lived fairly mundane lives. But how did the people of India live at the very beginning of the Indus Valley civilization, and how did their lifestyle change with migrations, conquests, Alexander the Great, and the Maurya Empire?

Everyday Life of the Indus Valley Civilization

Like many people of the ancient world who lived in a hot climate, the people of the Indus Valley spent a lot of their time outside since most of them lived in small, cramped houses. Even though these homes were small and often served as a working space as well, the rooftops were flat. This allowed the ancient people of the Indus Valley to use their roofs as an extra space to sleep, especially during extremely hot nights.

Wealthier people had courtyards, where they could plant flowerbeds or some fruit and vegetables to add to the table. They also used their courtyards to relax.

It is not certain whether all children went to school, but children did help around with daily chores. Children were taught to hunt, craft, cook, and farm. Hard work wasn't the only thing in these children's lives; they also had time to play. Scholars believe that both adults and children liked board games and dice games since dice with holes similar to the ones we use today have been found in numerous excavations over the years. Some historians think that the first dice could have been invented in ancient India. Children also played with whistles that often were shaped into different animals and birds. Another popular toy for children was terracotta monkeys that would roll by pulling a long string. Archaeologists have also discovered carts, and it is thought that children ran alongside the carts as they rolled down the hill or just observed the cart rolling down.

Most of the population at the time were either craftsmen, artisans, farmers, or hunters. But regardless of one's occupation, everyone depended on the Indus for life. From agricultural settlements on the banks of the river Indus to great cultural centers like Harappa, the fertile lands of the river were the ticking vein of a strong civilization. There was food in abundance, as agriculture developed at a fast pace, with elaborate irrigation and water storage systems. This allowed people to focus on other things besides work. Adults could swim in public pools, refresh, and take care of their hygiene.

Dancing was also an important part of religion, culture, and entertainment. Excavated figurines of dancing women can testify to this. People would also attend religious ceremonies and festivals a few times a year, which was also a way of socializing and sharing spiritual beliefs.

The people of ancient India could differentiate economic class based on the houses they lived in, but one could also tell societal differences based on clothing. The more colorful and more layered the robes were, the wealthier the person. Wealthy women would also wear a lot of gold jewelry with precious gems to show off their economic status.

Whether you were wealthy or not, your day would begin with breakfast. People in

ancient India had three meals a day, just as we do in modern times. For breakfast, they would often eat wheat or porridge with dates. Hydration was also important, especially during the hot days of summer, so water almost always accompanied breakfast. For lunch, they would have something refreshing, like melon, grapes, or other fruit that grew in the Indus Valley. For dinner, they would eat barley, peas, and wine, while the wealthy would also have meat. The poor who had learned to hunt also might have meat for dinner, or they would sell it.

Traders probably relied on bartering, as the Indus Valley civilization didn't mint coins. Archaeologists once found thousands of small rectangular tablets, which they thought were a form of coins or money. However, it was later determined that these were stamps; they were probably used by traders to create tags for their merchandise.

As smaller settlements turned into urbanized centers and cities, the life of the ancient Indus people changed with it.

Everyday Life in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro

Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were the biggest urban centers in the Indus Valley during the first wave of urbanization. As one might expect, the everyday life of the common people changed in many ways.

For starters, what was once agricultural settlements now became urban centers, with around forty thousand people in each of the cities. Urban planning also became more elaborate, with Mohenjo-daro and Harappa organizing buildings in grids. Public buildings were organized on a citadel mound in the northwest part of the city, and homes were built on the lower, descending part. In Mohenjo-daro, the citadel mound where the public buildings were erected also contained the Great Bath.

The Great Bath in Mohenjo-daro. Credit: Sujay Rao Mandavilli, Institute for the Study of Globalization.

Aside from the discovery of the Great Bath, archaeologists discovered a massive granary where the people of Mohenjo-daro kept their surplus of crops collected during the year. Harappa also had a substantial number of granaries and water tanks as well. Both cities used forts and brick walls to create physical borders that could have served as protection against potential attacks and floods. The houses often had multiple stories, and the lower part of the house could serve as a workshop for artisans and craftsmen. These workshops would seldom be in a separate part of the city that would pose as a working district. All houses and public buildings were built from the same type of brick, which was first dried in the sun then baked before being used for construction projects.

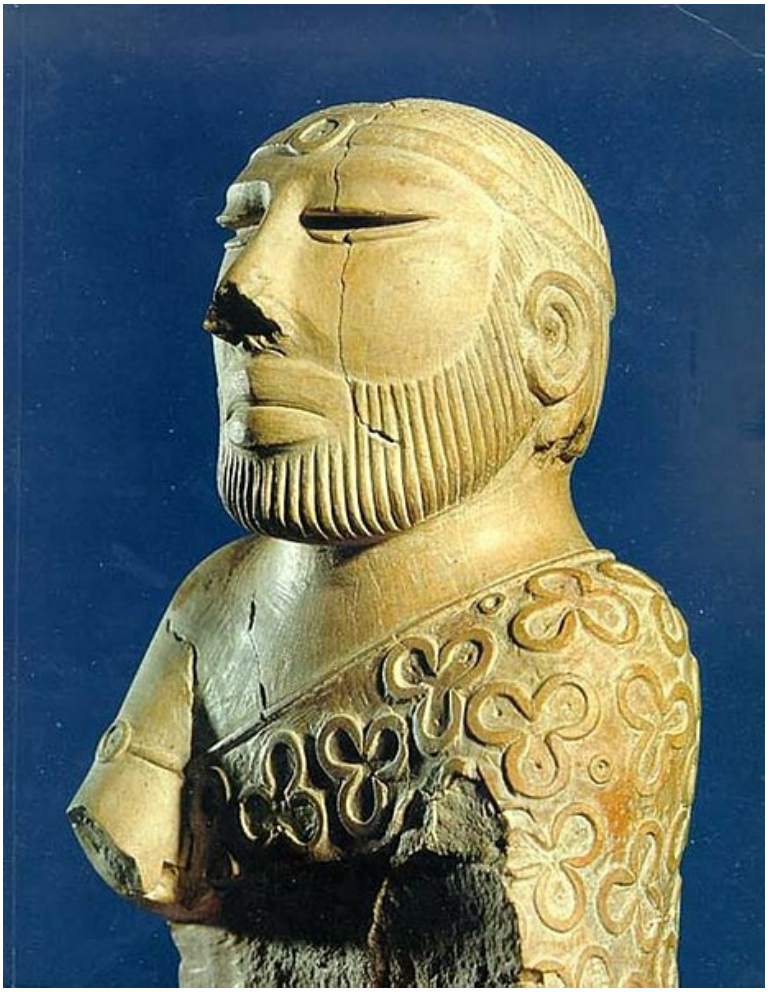
Most of the houses found in the lower part of the city would have private bathrooms

and their own baths, which were connected to the public sewage system that took care of the wastewater. People could clean the sewers easily, as the system was built beneath the streets of the city and had covers that could be removed for easy maintenance.

The people of Harappa had experienced metal workers, as there is evidence to support the idea that they made copper and bronze objects, whether they were figurines or cookware. They would also cook and keep their food stored in clay pots, some of which were made with the use of a pottery wheel, while others were made by hand.

The diet of the Harappans and the people of Mohenjo-daro consisted of various grains, like wheat, rice, and barley, and a great variety of fruit and vegetables. They also consumed meat like chicken, cattle, and wild game. Seafood and fish were also a part of their staple foods. A great number of animal bones were found during excavations, which indicates that the people of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro had meat in abundance. They also ate chickpeas, peas, pigeon peas, millet, mustard, sesame seeds, sorghum, chickpea and black pepper chutney, flaxseed with honey, pickled cucumber with cumin, and millet-stuffed spinach leaves.

Cotton was domesticated in this region around 5000 BCE, so the people of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were most likely skillful at weaving and sewing. Both women and men wore light garments. The upper garment resembled a shawl, and the lower part resembled modern-day dhotis, which were worn by men. Women wore long skirts. Statues like the Priest-King, who is dressed in floral garments, or a goddess with jewels indicate that women might have worn a lot of jewelry and that men liked wearing colorful clothes with ornaments. However, it is not certain whether people dressed like this daily or whether this was only the case for special occasions, such as religious ceremonies and festivals.



The Priest-King, which was found in Mohenjo-daro. Located in the National Museum of Karachi, Pakistan. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Goddess in jewels with big earrings. Located in Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Clothes weren't only made from cotton; people also used leather, silk, wool, linen, and flax to create garments. Jewelry was made from copper, gold, and different stones and gems.

To pass their free time, people would sing, dance, and swim, as well as play games that resembled chess. Dice games were still popular during this time too. Children would play with a variety of toys, including carts, animal figurines, woolen balls and toys, and board games.

How Alexander the Great Changed Life in India

While Alexander the Great changed the world map and political milieu in the Mediterranean and Indian subcontinent with his war campaigns and conquests, the connection that was established between the two continents also changed the lives of the common people.

As Alexander was preparing for what would become known as one of the greatest war campaigns in history, Macedonian soldiers were tasked with carrying and transporting saffron to Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Saffron would become a staple spice in traditional Asian and Indian dishes. Today, India is the fourth-largest producer of saffron in the world.

Other similarities between Greek and Indian cuisine are tzatziki and Indian sauce, which also involves herbs and garlic. The only difference between the two is that Greeks use yogurt, while curd is used in Indian cuisine. Curd is a product that is made by adding acidic ingredients to milk. Naan bread, a staple food of India, and pita bread, which was made in Greece, are also somewhat similar in style, although they are different types of bread.

The Greeks and the people of the Indian subcontinent shared more connections beyond gastronomy and cuisine. Greeks and Buddhists were both attracted to the idea of a vegetarian diet. Pythagoras taught his students that a vegetarian-based diet had the best effects on the body, while Buddhism preached vegetarianism in the spiritual sense, as it would affect one’s reincarnation.

Greeks also introduced Indian cultures to technology and innovations in astronomy and astrology. Chandragupta also incorporated the concept of having a standing army, which wasn’t the case before with the Indus Valley civilization.

It is also thought that the concept of coins was introduced to India by Greeks from Bactria. However, the excavation of rectangle coins in mint condition from Taxila, dating around 400 BCE, testifies to a different scenario, where the concept of coinage was already established in the Indian subcontinent, at least in some parts.

One of the biggest legacies of Alexander the Great left behind in India were military colonies that turned into settlements. These were mostly inhabited by the Greek populace. These military bases later became Greek colonies of migrants, who came from the Mediterranean and inhabited the Indian subcontinent.

Sometime around the decline of the Maurya Empire, a period known to history as the Indo-Greek era commenced. For the next two hundred years, Greek kings ruled the Indian subcontinent, and they would combine Hindu and Greek religions, including Buddhism. They would also blend ancient Greek symbols with Indian, as well as art and architecture.

Everyday Life of People in the Maurya Empire

The Maurya Empire was vast and thus had a dual nature of potential high stability and power or a fast decline into havoc. If the empire was ruled by a weak and indecisive king who would place his desires ahead of the empire's needs, the Maurya Empire would decline, as was the case soon after Ashoka's death. If it was ruled by a strong leader, the empire would thrive.

Such an empire would have a complex and elaborate system of governance, as well as a layered caste system, which was the case of the Maurya Empire. The caste system in Maurya wasn't determined based on birth but rather on occupation. Maurya's class system, or caste system, was divided into seven categories. The first of the seven castes were the Brahmins (priests and teachers). There were few Brahmins, but they were very respected, which was noted in Megasthenes's *Indica*. The second caste consisted of farmers. There were, of course, many farmers in Maurya, and they were well respected. The third caste was shepherds and hunters. Only shepherds and hunters were allowed to trade, breed, and hunt animals. The fourth caste was artisans, day laborers, and traders. The fifth caste was soldiers, and as Megasthenes records in his book, the soldiers would do nothing but drink when they weren't fighting wars for their king. Soldiers were paid from the empire's treasury even if there weren't any wars. The sixth caste consisted of inspectors, who acted as spies and were to report everything they heard to the king himself. The seventh caste was the king's officers who worked at the court or in other public offices. This included ministers, governors, judges, and administrative workers.

The governance system was elaborate, with governors taking care of the surrounding regions and a council of ministers helping the king. There were special tax collectors and census officers who would record the deaths of all the people in the empire, as well as the death of cattle. The purpose of having a census was to follow up with taxes, which filled the empire's treasury.

The Maurya Empire also became one of the main trading centers in the Indian subcontinent and farther, thanks to an ambitious project that the Great Road represented. This highway connected Pataliputra with Taxila, and there are also smaller roads leading to other parts of India. That is how the people of Maurya could easily trade, travel, and establish communication with other cities.

The empire also had officers who kept peace on the streets and took care of criminals, just like present-day police officers. Chandragupta knew that public health was of great importance for the peace and prosperity of his empire, so he made a great number of hospitals and employed doctors, nurses, and midwives. Healthcare was available to everyone, and it was free for all. To avoid food poisoning and cases of malnutrition, the king made food alteration punishable by

law.

There were two types of judicial courts: criminal and civil. However, the king made the final decision when it came to judicial matters. The king was considered to be the source of supreme justice. The death sentence could be used, especially in cases of murder and treason. Those who were sentenced to death would offer to give donations before they died so they would have a better life in their next reincarnation.

The position of women in the empire was favorable. Women could become one of the king's guards or work as officials. Women also had the right to their property, which were usually bridal gifts. Moreover, the mistreatment of women was punishable by law. Polygamy was reserved only for monarchs, but common people could marry more than a single woman in case their wife wasn't able to bear any children.

The empire was wealthy, so different types of food, both cultivated and imported, were available except for periods of famine. The empire could even afford a standing army of at least eighty thousand soldiers, who lived off the empire's treasury.

The people of Maurya had a diverse diet, consisting of various dairy products, beverages, meat and wild game, seafood and fish, grain, and fruit and vegetables. More than several types of rice and barley were cultivated within the empire's borders, while the people of Maurya also used masa, which was usually made during the cold season and in-between seasons when different cereals and grain were cultivated in the region. Masa is a form of dough that is used to make all kinds of dishes and delights, including flatbread. The people of Maurya would also make porridge and soups out of different grains and ingredients. Soups were particularly popular and nutritious. Another popular food choice was sugar. The Mauryan people also used honey. Spices were an important part of Mauryan cuisine; they used peppers, cloves, mustard, coriander, turmeric, ginger, cumin, and salt.

The Mauryan people loved their drinks too. They made rice beer and wine, grape juice, fruit syrups, and all kinds of liquor and non-alcoholic beverages.

Compared to the pre-Mauryan period, the people of the Mauryan Empire had more or less a stable lifestyle and could prosper, especially during the reign of Chandragupta and Ashoka the Great.

Chapter 10 – The Cultural Legacy of Ancient India: Art, Architecture, and Religion

While architecture can tell a lot about a civilization, such as its development, technology, and lifestyle, art leaves behind an important cultural heritage. And religion is often a great source of knowledge and information about a civilization lost to the sands of time. What is the cultural legacy of ancient India, and what can art, architecture, and religion reveal about the greatness and beauty of ancient India?

Art and Architecture in Ancient India

As far as the architectural legacy of ancient India is concerned, there aren't many remains that can testify to its greatness. But from the remains of buildings made with sun-dried baked bricks to Megasthenes's description of Chandragupta's magnificent palace with elaborate wood carvings and ornaments, it is difficult not to believe that even more magnificent buildings are now lost and forgotten to the tooth of relentless time and decay.

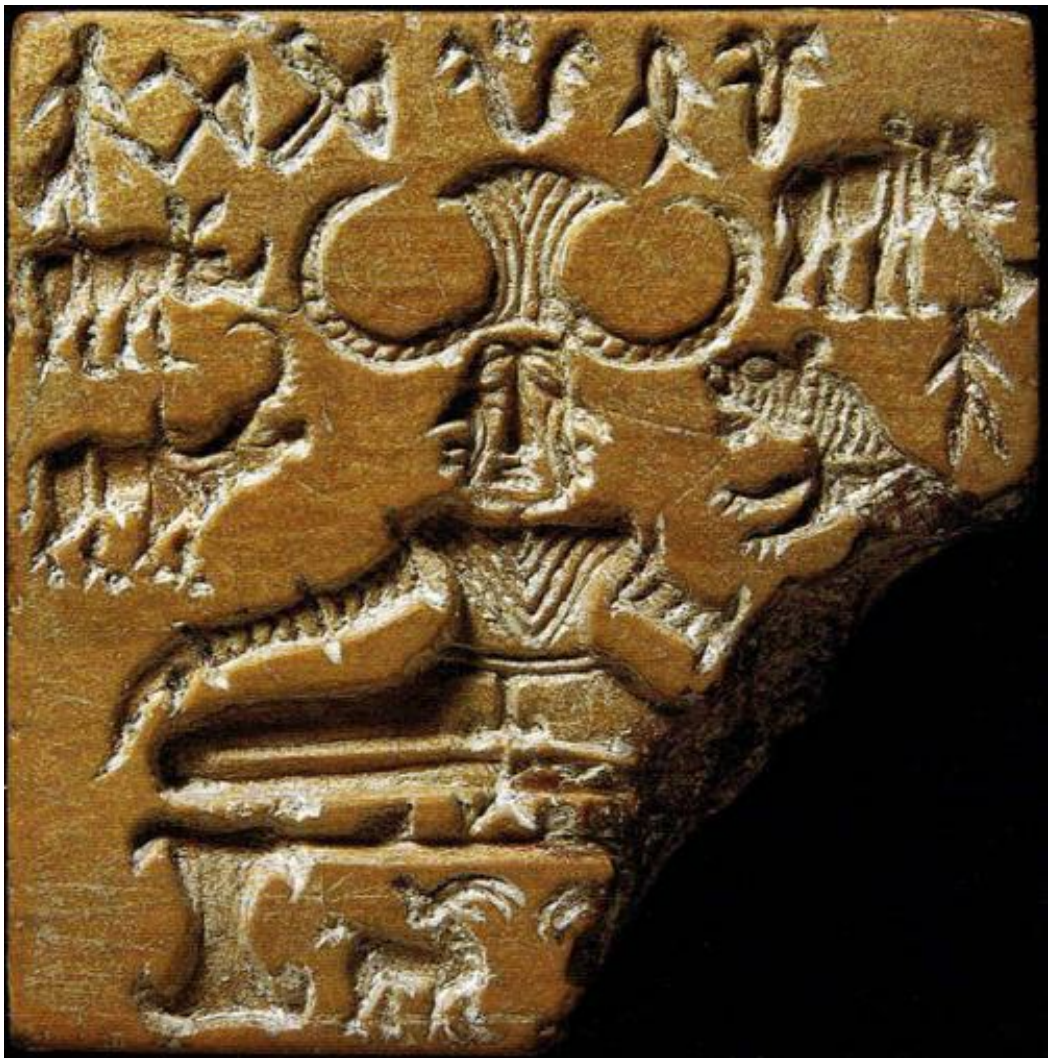
Dholavira ruins, western India, Gujarat. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Megasthenes's *Indica* was not the only ancient book that talked about arts and architecture in India. The *Manasara* is one of the most cherished texts on architecture, and it reveals details on the principles used in the sculpture and architecture of ancient India.

Not all construction projects were meant to be pretty; sometimes, they were meant to be useful and strong. After all, ancient Indian masons built tall walls and forts for protection. Many cities from the time of the Harappa civilization started to erect tall forts and walls around their borders to prevent floods and intrusions and to create a defense against potential attacks.

Rajgir city walls dating from around the 6th century BCE, Magadh region, Bihar. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

A great number of seals with ornaments and different symbols, such as animals, also testify to an early inclination toward art and artistic forms. Thousands of stamp seals were retrieved during numerous excavations since the discovery of cities like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.



The Pashupati seal, Indus Valley civilization, Mohenjo-daro, around 2500 BCE. The seal depicts a seated creature surrounded by animals. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

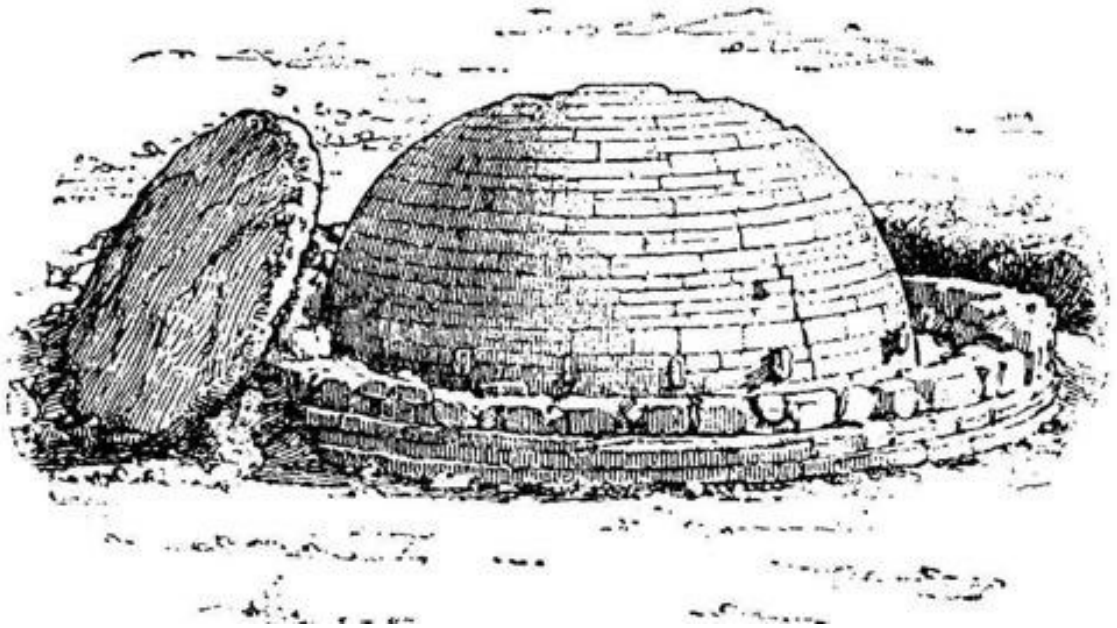
One of the most famous seals is the Pashupati seal, which was excavated in the Mohenjo-daro archaeological site and dates from around 2500 BCE. The seal shows a seated or throned human-like creature surrounded by all kinds of animals, including a bison, tiger, and goats. The scene might depict a deity from the early days of the Indus Valley civilization.

A great number of seals were found later in Harappa and across the Indian subcontinent in the former centers of some of the first civilizations. Most of them depict animals. The seals might have had a ceremonial and religious reason, while some might have been used as trading tags for merchandising purposes.

The golden age of art in ancient India would probably be the Mauryan era, especially during the period of Ashoka's reign. While Ashoka's grandfather and the founder of the Maurya Empire, Chandragupta, mostly commissioned wooden

buildings and objects that didn't survive the test of time but were remembered in some scriptures, Ashoka created stone buildings and sculptures across the empire. Many of Ashoka's pillar and stone edicts remain intact. They were excavated hundreds of years after Ashoka's death.

Ashoka built stupas, which are religious monuments. There, Buddha's relics and remains were kept by the will of Ashoka. Ancient writers attribute Ashoka as the founder of over eighty-four thousand stupas across the Indian subcontinent.



A form of an early stupa, probably built during the Maurya Empire around the 3rd century BCE outside Chakdara, Pakistan. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Ashoka also commissioned the building and decorating of pillars, rock-cut caves, and palaces. One of the most famous and legendary palaces that are said to have been built during Ashoka's time is Ashoka's Hell—a prison building that looked like the most beautiful palace in the world but hid unimaginable horrors of blood, gore, and torture. The remains of this supposed palace were never found, which is why its existence is speculated.

The most famous group of caves cut from a massive rock formation and attributed to Ashoka has to be the Barabar Hill Caves, located in Bihar, India, specifically in the region of Makhdumpur. The caves might have been commissioned by Ashoka but were finished later during the reign of his grandson, Dasharatha. The Lomas Rishi Cave dates from around 250 BCE and is the oldest surviving rock-cut architecture.

The entrance to the Lomas Rishi Cave, which is dated to around 250 BCE, the Mauryan period. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The caves were often decorated with sculptures of ancient ascetics and depicted important lessons of Dharma and Buddhism, including Nirvana, also known as Parinirvana. Therefore, art and architecture were often used as mediums for religious education and spiritual enlightenment.

A sculpture of an ascetic of the Ajivika cult, commissioned by the Mauryan dynasty between the 3rd and 2nd century BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The entrance corridor of Sudama cave, one of the caves carved into Barabar Hill. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The city of Pataliputra was the capital of the Maurya Empire, and it was decorated with lavish architecture whose remains were discovered during the excavations. Pataliputra was a major city that had between 150,000 and 400,000 inhabitants during the reign of Ashoka. Some of the most significant architectural remains from the Mauryan era were found in the archaeological site of Kumrahar, where the ancient city of Pataliputra was once located. As Megasthenes writes about the Mauryan capital, the city had nearly six hundred towers and sixty-four gates.

Ruins of a hall with the pillars intact at the Kumrahar site (Pataliputra). It was built during the Mauryan era around the 3rd century BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The splendor and magnificence of the Mauryan capital can be imagined based on some of the architectural remains, among which is the Pataliputra palace chapiter.

The Pataliputra chapiter, which was excavated in the ruins of the Mauryan palace in Pataliputra. It has been dated to between the 4th and 3rd century BCE. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The chapiter, another name for the capital, was the part of the pillar that supported the structure. The chapiter has some elements of Greek architecture, which confirms the influence of Hellenistic styles and art on the culture in ancient India. The main motif on the Pataliputra chapiter is a flame palmette, with supporting decorative elements such as bead and reel patterns and rosettes on the top edge.

Many architectural and artistic finds, especially pieces dating from the Mauryan era, are closely related to religion.

Religion in Ancient India

During the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods, the people of ancient India believed in the spiritualism of female and male principles, as well as natural forces. The creative human nature, with its ability to make, create, and imagine, was also considered sacred. The people of the Indus Valley civilization would often attribute characteristics of the divine to natural forces, such as the sun and the moon. Some of the scriptures in Vedic culture, like the *Rig Veda*, reveal that Indo-Aryans had numerous deities and followed a polytheistic religion. The main way of worshiping these sacred entities was through rituals of offerings. For instance, they would offer food to fire to honor gods like Agni, Varuna, Rudra, Indra, and Surya, which are all deities of Hinduism.

A depiction of Agni, the god of fire, riding a goat. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Agni is the Hindu deity that represents fire and serves as the protector of men. Indra is the god of war, thunder, storms, rain, lightning, and rivers. Varuna is believed to be the lord of the sky and seas, and he later became a god of justice and truth. Rudra is the deity of wind, storms, and hunting, and Surya is the god of the sun and the father of other deities, such as the god of death, Yama.

A 1940s artwork that depicts Surya, the god of the sun, light, and day. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

What makes the thought and philosophy of ancient India different from Western thought is a deeper insight into the nature of the soul, spiritualism, and the overall meaning of life and all its intricacies. Due to India's numerous reforms of spiritualism, religion, and philosophy, it transformed into a colorful cloth of different faiths.

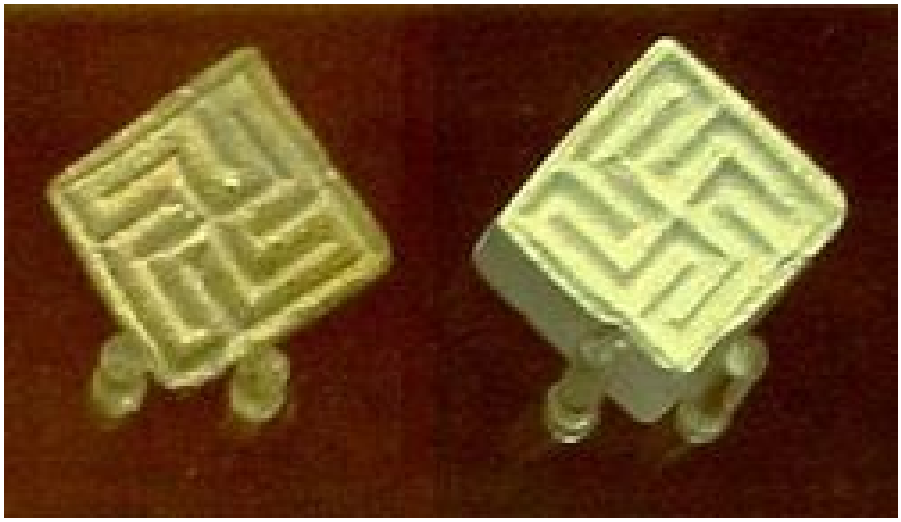
One of the oldest religions in India is Jainism. Jainism relies on the three sacred pillars of nonviolence, non-attachment, and non-absolutism. Jains were predominantly vegetarian, as they followed a vow of nonviolence, and there are other practices within the religion, like sexual constraints, a vow not to steal, restraining from owning too many possessions, and dedicating one's life to serve the truth.

The official symbol of Jainism. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Jainism is neither theistic nor atheistic. Instead, it can be considered a spiritual philosophy that goes beyond these two concepts, thus categorizing it as transtheistic. Moreover, Jainism is one of the oldest continuous religions that have survived the test of time; it is still being practiced in some parts of India. According to Jainism,

the world exists perpetually and was not created by a god or a sacred entity but is independent and will exist forever. Like Buddhism, which came later to the religious scene of Asia with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Jains believe in reincarnation, i.e., being born again as a mortal.

The swastika is a significant symbol of Jainism, and it was later adopted by other ethnicities and religions, like Buddhism.



Seals with swastika symbols that were found in the Indus Valley; they are today located in the British Museum. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The dual nature of a swastika represents the dual nature of Brahma, the god who created the universe and everything within it. A swastika that is facing right signifies the evolution of the universe; if the swastika faces left, it represents the involution of it. In Hinduism, the swastika signifies the deity Vishnu and the sun rays that give life to every breathing creature on the earth.

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, with most of its followers living in India.

Buddhism originated in the 5th century BCE, and as mentioned before, it also adopted the swastika as a symbol. There is a story of Buddha's disciples stamping a swastika on his chest after he died. The stamp is known as the Heart's Seal. One of the most compelling religious teachings was preached by Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Buddha. A young prince found the truth about worldly pleasures and sufferings, so he quit his life of comfort and luxury to lead an ascetic life and dedicated his existence to teaching people about the noble ways of Dharma. Buddhism was one of the largest religions in ancient India since its founding. One of the greatest kings in the history of India, Ashoka, was a great devotee.

The edicts of Ashoka and over eighty-four thousand stupas were commissioned and built to spread the word of Buddhism. Ashoka's change of heart was also a popular story among Buddhists of the time, as they wanted to emphasize how Buddhism

could change people for the better. Today, around eight million people in India are Buddhists, which is less than 1 percent of the present-day population in India. However, Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, with China boasting the largest Buddhist population.

Even though Ashoka was a proclaimed Buddhist, there were many different religions practiced within the borders of the great Mauryan Empire, including Jainism. There was another religious cult in ancient India called Zoroastrianism, but it is not known whether this sect converged from Buddhism or Jainism. Zoroastrianism is an old religion, possibly drawing origins from the 2nd millennium BCE. The first written evidence of this religion and its Iranian prophet, Zoroaster, appear in the 5th century BCE. Zoroastrianism is a combination of theology and philosophy, proscribing good words, good deeds, and good thoughts so that people can fight evil with the goodness in their hearts. This religion is still around today, making it one of the world's oldest continuously practicing religions.

At last, with frequent and large-scale migrations of ancient Greeks to the Indian subcontinent, the Maurya Empire saw a rise of religious followers of Greek polytheism. This created a clash of different myths, legends, thoughts, philosophies, and spiritual beliefs, making ancient India a unique cultural ecosystem with a rich historical legacy.

Conclusion

From the first sign of a thriving civilization that bloomed thanks to elaborate irrigation systems and developing agriculture on the banks of the Indus River to the founding of one of the largest empires in world history, ancient India went through radical changes within seven thousand years.

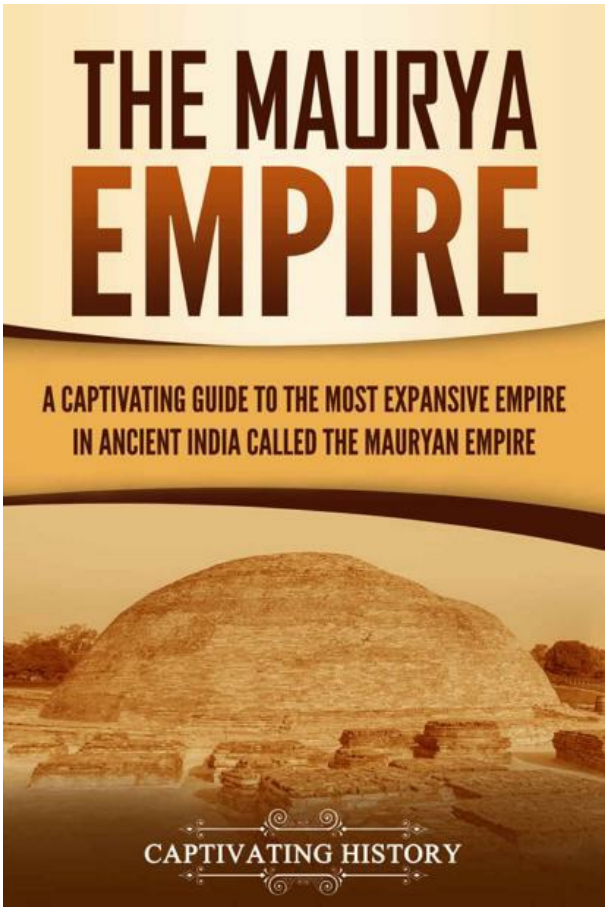
Due to India’s complex evolution, we can now enjoy myths, legends, and attested historical facts fueled by what is left of once-great empires and pioneer settlements of civilization.

Even though we only have a glimpse into the world and life of ancient India, it is not difficult to imagine the splendor and richness of the Maurya Empire or the fearlessness and ambition of Alexander the Great, who came to this beautiful land with dreams of conquering the world.

We are glad you went on this trip to the past to learn more about the marvelous Indian subcontinent. Hopefully, this book has piqued your interest to learn even more about India’s evolution. After all, the history of civilization cannot be lost if it is not forgotten.

Part 2: The Maurya Empire

A Captivating Guide to the Most Expansive Empire in Ancient India


THE MAURYA
EMPIRE
A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO THE MOST EXPANSIVE EMPIRE
IN ANCIENT INDIA CALLED THE MAURYAN EMPIRE
CAPTIVATING HISTORY

Introduction

For nearly a century and a half, the Maurya, or Mauryan, Empire existed as the largest ancient empire on the Indian subcontinent. Stretching from west of the Indus River Valley (modern-day Afghanistan) to include the rest of the Indian Peninsula, except for the southern tip, Maurya was a geopolitical and cultural phenomenon. In 321 BCE, the Maurya Empire was established by the ambitious and well-connected Chandragupta Maurya, who controlled a network of loyal followers through his mentor and chief advisor, Chanakya.

After about a quarter of a century of uncontested rule, Chandragupta was followed by his son and heir, Bindusara, who reigned for around twenty-four years. In 268 BCE, the determined Ashoka (*Asoka*) controversially rose to power, supposedly by murdering several of his brothers. After Ashoka extended the boundaries of the empire, most notably through the conquest of the Kalinga region, he unexpectedly turned to the non-violent path of Buddhism and spent the remainder of his thirty-six-year rule spreading the Buddhist religion to the far reaches of the Maurya Empire. Ashoka's many contributions to history include a series of edicts, which were inscribed mostly on pillars and stones.

The Mauryan Empire existed for another fifty-two years after Ashoka's death, but it declined and shrank throughout the reigns of the next six emperors. Maurya was finally overthrown in 185 BCE by Pushyamitra of the Shunga dynasty.

Recognized as an ancient center of learning and culture, particularly during its zenith in the reign of Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire left an indelible mark on history through architecture, edicts, and the unexpected adherence of its first three conquering emperors to non-violent religions while establishing and extending the empire through warfare.

Chapter 1 – Ancient India before Maurya

The Iron Age began in India in 1500 BCE with the spiritual Vedic culture of the northwestern (Punjab) Indo-Aryan people. India began as a subcontinental region that also included parts of the modern-day countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Most of the population predominated the Indo-Gangetic Plain—the fertile lands of the Indus and Ganges (Ganga) Rivers that formed the main extent of the occupied Indian subcontinent. As they were bordered by the Himalayas to the north, the Indian population eventually spread down to populate the lands of the Indian Peninsula.

By 326 BCE, the Indian subcontinent was diversified in both language and culture. Hindu rajas ruled small kingdoms or chieftaincies, which were beginning to grow rich in resources and power. This wealth attracted the attention of Alexander the Great, who was poised to invade from the northwest when his troops rebelled, and he subsequently died in 323 BCE. Alexander had spent two years gaining some of the lands of the Punjab region but never accomplished his goal of dominating the Indian subcontinent. Many of Alexander's troops and generals remained within the bounty of the fertile Indus River Valley (forming the western and northwestern boundary of the Indian subcontinent) and laid the foundation for Indo-Greco relations during the Mauryan Empire.

The Vedic religion, also known as ancient Hinduism, was succeeded by Brahmanism (or Brahminism), a form of Hinduism dominated by priestly Brahmans that eventually evolved into contemporary Hinduism. By the sixth century BCE, Hinduism was being eroded by the newly established religions of Jainism and Buddhism. The first three consecutive rulers of the Mauryan Empire adhered to Jainism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism before the empire began reverting to Hinduism. The dissolution of the Mauryan Empire in 185 BCE marked the beginning of the Hindu renaissance, which eventually led to the golden age of the Gupta Empire, which began in the 4th century CE and ended in approximately 550 CE.

Administratively, the Indian subcontinent was governed by a series of chieftaincies, or janapadas. When the Indo-Aryans began migrating south to more fully populate the fertile plains, these chieftaincies began consolidating into kingdoms, also known as the Mahajanapadas. The Mahajanapada of Magadha was situated in the northeastern corner of the populated subcontinent, and its capital, Pataliputra (modern-day Patna in the northeastern state of Bihar), was the setting for the rise and fall of the Maurya Empire.

The existing Nanda Empire of the Magadha region (northeastern subcontinent) controlled the Ganges River trade routes as well as those to the open seaports in the Bay of Bengal. Originating in approximately 345 BCE, the Nanda Empire stretched

from Punjab in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. It was bordered by the Himalayas to the north and extended south to the Vindhya Range, which means it essentially included the expanse of the fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain. The Nanda Empire grew rich and powerful through trade and the acquisition of natural resources. Their military might was centered in the political capital of Pataliputra.

The Nanda Empire

There were sixteen Mahajanapadas by 325 BCE, and they had all grown rich through the development and trade of iron, as well as through the wise use of other resources or even plunder. Magadha was the most powerful of the four most prominent Mahajanapadas. Its power came from rich iron deposits, which were used to make weaponry or for trade. Magadha also held a strategic position on the northeastern corner of the rich and fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain, where the Indian subcontinent began giving way to modern-day Nepal and Bangladesh. Its capital was protected at the intersection of the Ganges and Son Rivers. Finally, the use of abundant war elephants to dominate in warfare gave Magadha the advantage it needed to get ahead politically.

The Magadhan Empire was the forerunner of the Mauryan dynasties. It is believed the Magadhan Empire started sometime in the 6th century BCE, and it lasted until 321 BCE. The Magadhan Empire has been divided into three great dynasties: the Haryanka dynasty (544– 412 BCE), the Shishunaga dynasty (412– 344 BCE), and finally, the Nanda dynasty (344– 322 BCE). Legends tell that the first great emperor of India, Mahapadma, used a huge army to create the first sole monarchy of the Indian subcontinent, thus beginning the Nanda Empire. After two decades of Nanda rule, Alexander’s troops invaded Punjab. At the time, King Dhana Nanda (r. 329–322 BCE) was on the throne.

The Nanda Empire had been the first in India, and one of the first in the world, to institute a centralized administration from which to govern and draw taxes. Ancient records suggest that the Nanda kings (nine in total) created a currency system and amassed great wealth by dominating trade along the northern reaches of the subcontinent. However, folklore identifies that those in power were also unpopular with their subjects because of their low birth, as well as high taxation and general misconduct and corruption. Legend says that young men across the empire were dissatisfied with the corruption of King Dhana and his Nanda officials, as well as by the excessive use of resources to fight the battles that had established the empire. Along with the fragmentation of the remaining Indian subcontinent into Mahajanapadas and then the eventual death of Alexander the Great, the time was ripe for a power shift and the installation of new leadership.

Historical sources from Iron Age India are convoluted and contradictory, and there is little written history to verify these legends and folktales. Even Greco-Roman

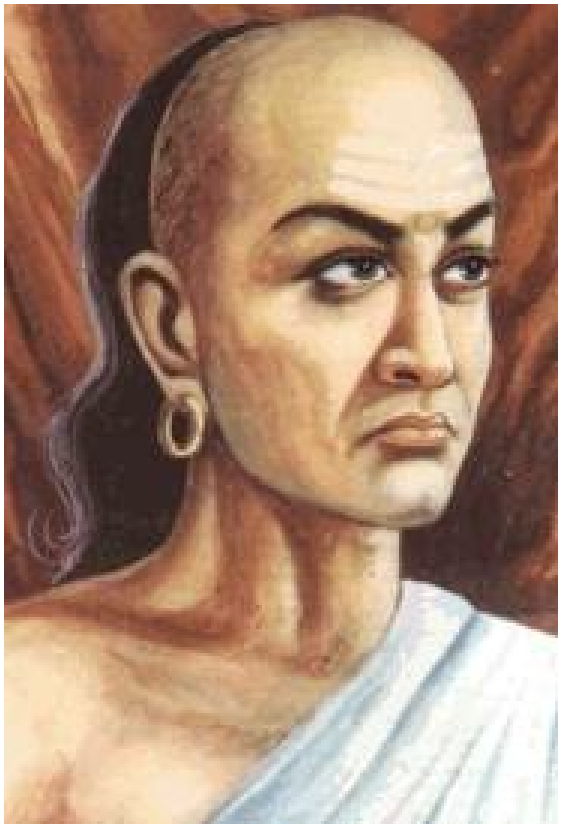
sources are confusing and don't lend much weight to Indian accounts. Names and ancestry are particularly confusing; oftentimes, one leader has a surplus of traditional names as well as Greco-Roman names. For these reasons, the history before Maurya, and even the Mauryan dynasty itself, cannot be considered as absolutely accurate or historically factual. Scriptural texts from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism form the basis for indigenous tradition. The Puranas, in particular, are an essential part of ancient Indian literature, and they depict legends and traditional lore. This genre of literature is found in two of the primary religions of India: Hinduism and Jainism. The Puranas were written in Sanskrit, Tamil, and other languages. While the Hindu works are anonymous, the Jain works have attributed authors. The Puranas are very inconsistent and are layered in symbology. The works cannot always be considered as direct facts but sometimes rather allegories for the truth; they are also not technically scriptures but rather remembrances of culture. There are thirty-six major and minor Puranas, which contain over 400,000 verses. Thought to be written between the 3rd and 10th century CE, the Puranas were supposed to have served an encyclopedic function in their time, as they include detailed information on geography, history, politics, astronomy, creation theories, cosmology, and philosophy (as well as a list of the Mauryan kings). Works such as the play *Mudrarakshasa*, "The Ring of Rakshasa" (a drama written by Vishakhadatta that is set in the 4th and 3rd century BCE), and the Kashmiri *Kathasaritsagara* (a collection of folktale stories by the Shaivite Somadeva, written in the 11th century CE) are also critically important sources of history. Other religious works, such as the Jain *Parishishtaparvan*, which was composed by a 12th-century Jain writer named Hemachandra, and many other texts across the Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain belief systems have supplied legendary references that enable the Mauryan story to be pieced together, if not factually then at least metaphorically. Along with archaeological findings and Greco-Roman references, the apocryphal evidence can, at times, be substantiated or at least provide a more detailed picture of possibilities.

What is clear, however, is that the center of power was the capital of Pataliputra in Magadha (modern-day Patna). The Nandas mostly controlled the capital province and the Ganges valleys that ran west and northwest toward the Indus Valley, which separates modern-day India from Pakistan. In 326 BCE, Alexander's army was poised at the western perimeters to invade the Nanda territories, but the armies did not get a chance to meet in battle. The Macedonian troops refused to go any farther when they discovered the extent and resources of the Nanda army. King Dhana Nanda (known to the Greco-Roman world as Xandrames or Agrammes) was said to have controlled an immense and terrifying army of 20,000 cavalry, 200,000 infantry, 2,000 chariots, and 3,000 elephants, as well as vast monetary resources.

The demoralized Macedonian army mutinied, forcing Alexander to withdraw and ultimately return to Babylon (Iraq), where he died in 323 BCE.

According to folklore, the Nanda Empire's capital was also a place of learning, culture, and art. Economically, the Nanda dynasty was strong, and they began a system of common coinage, which continued into the Mauryan dynasty. It is not clear whether the Nanda kings had exclusive access to iron ore mines or other rich mineral deposits or whether they controlled other resources like timber and elephants, but many historical sources refer to the great wealth of the Nanda Empire. There were even rumors of the last Nanda king hoarding great treasure in the Ganges riverbed, only for it to be swept away in the floods and deposited on the alluvial plains!

Overtaxation and greed became the downfall of the Nanda Empire, along with the general opinion that the rulers were of low birth and not righteous in their conduct. Both this civil fragmentation and the aborted invasion by Alexander formed the ideal conditions for a change in power. Ancient indigenous sources tell of the rise of the strategic and ambitious Chanakya (c. 350– 275 BCE), who, for some reason, had been present at the Nanda royal court, possibly as a royal advisor, but had been insulted and left. In revenge, Chanakya proceeded to instigate an uprising to overthrow the Nanda dynasty.



[1] An artist's impression of Chanakya (possibly also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta).

Chanakya is historically attributed with putting the first ruler of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta Maurya, in power.

Most sources broadly agree that Chanakya was a scholar from Takshashila (modern-day Taxila, Pakistan). He was well versed in several of the Hindi Vedas (scriptural texts) and also had a good understanding of politics and economics. He was a Brahmin—a Hindu priest—who was focused on teaching and passing on sacred learning across generations. Brahmins were not necessarily simply holy men. They held the highest status in Hindu society and could also be farmers, soldiers, or tradespeople. In Chanakya's case, he was a professor specializing in religion, mathematics, science, geography, and later politics.

It is likely that Chanakya was present in Taxila when Alexander's troops invaded Punjab. Chanakya saw the Greek influence as a potential threat to the Indian culture and began seeking inroads with King Dhana Nanda. Of the many confusing sources regarding Chanakya, one of the common threads is that during a visit to the capital of the Nanda kings—Pataliputra—he was insulted and left in a rage, vowing to bring down the empire. Other sources claim that Chanakya was more involved in the Nanda dynasty at the capital and that he was a minister of the court. He argued with King Dhana Nanda and either left in a rage or fled for his life westward toward Ujjain or Ujjaini (the western extremities of the greater Magadha region) or north to Taxila. He set out to find somebody worthy of his assistance in gaining power and overthrowing the Nanda dynasty. We will never know how much of this tale is true, although we do know that Chanakya and the future founder of the Maurya Empire—Chandragupta Maurya—were consorts. Chanakya already had allies from his association with Taxila, such as the Punjab rulers and the Himalayan King Parvata (Porus), and together with Chandragupta, they began gathering forces and resources for a rebellion.

Chapter 2 – Rise of the Mauryan Empire

The Installment of Chandragupta Maurya

The Mauryan story begins with the relatively obscure figure of Chandragupta Maurya (c. 340– 297 BCE), who attracted the attention of the politically well-positioned but disgruntled Chanakya. (There are many Chandraguptas throughout Indian history, which is why the addition of Maurya is used. Chandragupta was known as Sandrokottos or Androcottus to the Western world at the time.) Legend tells that Chanakya had been grievously insulted by King Dhana Nanda and vowed revenge and the complete destruction of the Nanda Empire. As a mentor to Chandragupta Maurya, Chanakya used his considerable persuasive power, intelligence network, and other resources to wage a series of battles that eventually put Chandragupta in power, with Chanakya as his chief advisor.

[2] Statue of Chandragupta Maurya (r. 321–297 BCE), founder of the Mauryan Empire: Laxminarayan Temple, New Delhi, India.

Chanakya had been a scholar of Taxila, a strategically located urban node in Punjab where the Indian subcontinent met central Asia. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, was possibly politically involved in the Nanda Empire when he was purportedly offended by King Dhana Nanda. Chanakya left the capital of Pataliputra

in Magadha, after which he met Chandragupta as a boy or young man. He took Chandragupta under his tutelage, with a long-term vision of using him to eliminate the Nanda Empire. It is not clear why he chose to incite Chandragupta specifically to create a rebellion against the Nanda Empire except that his young charge may have displayed more than ordinary intelligence and skills.

Much of the history of the Mauryan Empire can be attributed to two ancient works, as well as the edicts of Ashoka, the third Mauryan emperor. One of these ancient works was a treatise, the *Arthashastra*, which was allegedly authored by Chanakya. It describes the statecraft, economic policy, and military strategy of the time in ancient Indian Sanskrit. The second well-known source is a play called *Mudrarakshasa* by the Indian Sanskrit poet and playwright Vishakhadatta. However, neither the *Arthashastra* nor the *Mudrarakshasa* has managed to paint a clear picture of Chanakya and his accomplice Chandragupta Maurya, so the real details of Chandragupta's meteoric rise to power remain largely a mystery.

But who was Chandragupta, and why was he chosen by Chanakya to be the political figurehead? It is widely accepted that it was Chanakya, not Chandragupta Maurya, who engineered the dismantling of the Nanda dynasty and the establishment of the Mauryan Empire in 321 BCE (also recorded as 322 BCE in some sources). Chanakya took the young Chandragupta under his wing, and together, they established a strategic hold on the Mauryan Empire, first through warfare and then via political maneuvering and murder.

Some records describe the interrelationship between Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya as so intertwined that they could be confused as the same person. There is evidence that Chandragupta Maurya was a descendant of the royal Nanda Empire, but other evidence points to him being of lowly birth and that his special skills and intelligence attracted the attention of the learned and politically sophisticated Chanakya. One particular source describes Chandragupta Maurya as the grandson of Nanda King Sarvartha-siddhi. Other records claim that as a young and unknown soldier of a low caste, he led a campaign to expel the Greek invaders. Certain histories position Chandragupta as a military man who sought to play a role in Alexander's campaigns, and once he was rejected, he learned military skills from the Nanda army and then from Chanakya. Several Greco-Roman historians, including Plutarch (c. 46– 120 CE) and Megasthenes (c. 350–290 BCE), the latter of whom attended the Mauryan royal court, mention a meeting between Alexander and Chandragupta that ended in disaster. What is most likely, however, is that no matter Chandragupta's lineage or career path, he was of a similar caste (social class) to Chanakya. They probably belonged to Kshatriya (ruler/warrior caste), which would have been one of the most likely reasons to bring them into contact.

Most histories suggest a long and intimate association between Chandragupta and

Chanakya, in which Chanakya was a mentor, teacher, and influencer. It is evident that Chanakya's aim was a centralized pan-Indian empire that could restore order and fend off invaders. The fragmented republics and kingdoms were clearly not able to create peace or adequately protect the borders of the subcontinental kingdoms. It is also clear that Chandragupta and Chanakya took advantage of the political turmoil created by the departure of Alexander's troops and amassed resources and political allies to support their cause of overthrowing the Nanda dynasty. Buddhist legends suggest that the Nanda monarchy was strong at its core in Pataliputra but that their influence weakened farther from the capital. Apparently, after an initial aborted attempt at taking the capital, Chandragupta leveraged this situation by conquering outlying areas of the realm before turning his attention on the capital. Some of the outlying areas taken by Chandragupta Maurya were the regions previously conquered by Alexander the Great. It is likely that he used this recaptured northwestern territory as a base from which to capture Magadha. Most sources describe a long preparatory period in which Chandragupta Maurya was tutored by Chanakya in statecraft and warfare, during which Chandragupta also learned to be a soldier, although it is entirely possible that he could have been a part of the Nanda army or even under Alexander the Great during his conquest years in the northwest. What is clear is that Chandragupta began gaining power and ground in the northwestern territories where the Nanda hold was weakest.

Death and Deception to Gain and Retain Power

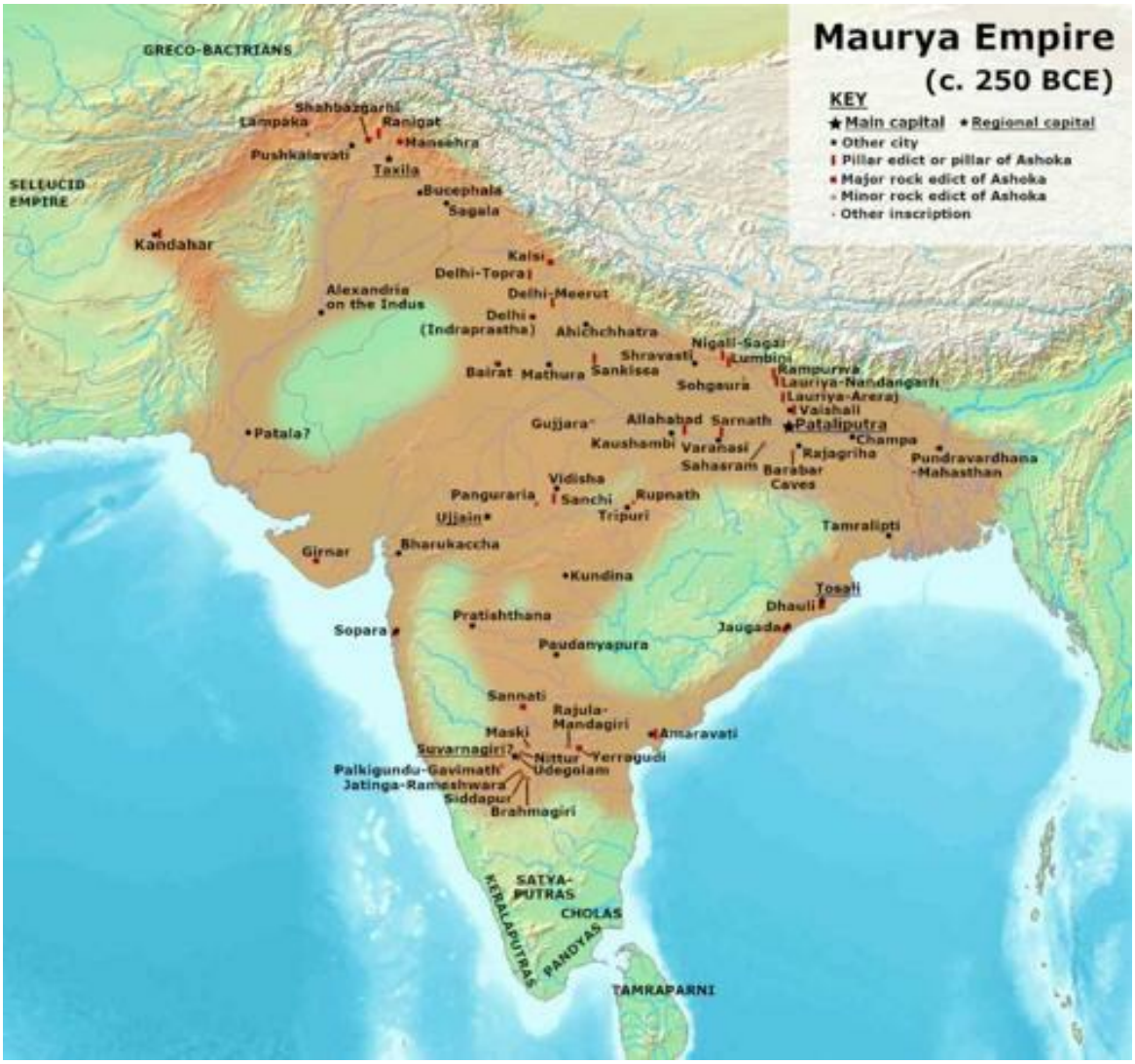
Irrespective of who really held power or intent in the Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya relationship, they began their conquest of the Nanda Empire through the formation of an alliance with the powerful King Parvata (or Porus), whose realm lay along the northwestern Himalayan boundary. Folklore suggests that Chandragupta and Chanakya were well connected politically and socially and began their alliances through not only the recruitment of King Parvata and his son, Malayaketu, but also with the governor of Taxila, several of Chanakya's students, and other eminent persons in powerful and influential positions, such as the rulers of small subcontinental Indian states. Chanakya used his extensive intelligence network and considerable powers of persuasion to gather up men and resources from across the greater Magadha region and other provinces—men who were apparently disgruntled with the Nanda rulership of corruption and oppression. It is even highly probable that many of their soldiers would have been unemployed Greek troops (*Yona* or *Yavana*) taken on as paid mercenaries.

Chandragupta's army began gaining inroads into the Nanda Empire by attacking and dominating the outer villages of the Nanda frontiers. Accumulating support and resources as they went, they established garrisons in their conquered lands and gained allies who were keen to overthrow the unpopular Nandas. (The unpopularity

of the Nanda kings was confirmed in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*.) After an apparent initial defeat to capture Pataliputra, they agreed to create an allied army with many more powerful fiefdoms. Buddhist legends suggest that the final militia that overthrew the Nanda dynasty consisted of Macedonians (*Yavanas*), Himalayans (Kiratas), Scythians (Shakas), Kambojas, Persians (*Parasikas*), and the Bactrians (Bahlikas).

With the intent to divide and conquer, this allied army launched a series of battles, eventually invading Pataliputra (also known as Kusumapura, "City of Flowers"), this time successfully. Legend states that they met the Nanda general, Bhadrasala, outside of the city walls and laid siege to the capital. It was within this atmosphere of civil unrest that the heir to the Nanda kingdom was assassinated. King Dhana escaped into exile, leaving his prime minister, Rakshasa, behind—or at least so the folktales state. It is also possible that King Dhana Nanda died in the battle. Some sources suggest that the final overthrow of Magadha was extremely difficult and that Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya employed mercenaries to attack the ruling army and executed guerilla tactics because the Nanda army was too powerful to take head-on.

By the time Chandragupta Maurya ascended the throne, he was about twenty-five years old. The allied forces took time to consolidate the capital in the midst of animosity and danger. Chandragupta narrowly escaped an assassination attempt at the beginning of his reign from a girl who had been sent by Rakshasa, the escaped former prime minister of the Nanda Empire. Chanakya intercepted the assassin and instead redirected the killer to their ally, King Parvata, casting the blame of Parvata's death on Rakshasa. Parvata's son, Malayaketu, uncovered the deception and allied himself with the exiled Rakshasa. More assassination attempts were made by Rakshasa, but they were all foiled by the ever-watchful Chanakya.



[3] The extent of the Mauryan Empire during the reign of Chandragupta's grandson, Ashoka, in 250 BCE gives an idea of the potential extremities of the empire. Chandragupta managed to recapture the northwestern territories and came to dominate most of the northern Indo-Gangetic Plain. It is unlikely that his realm ever stretched farther south than Karnataka. The eastern territory (in green) shows the illusive Kalinga region and the location of the Dhauli edict (likely location of the Kalinga War).

Chanakya, the real power behind the newly installed Mauryan throne, continued to plot, lie, and murder, ensuring that the stronghold of Chandragupta Maurya remained intact. He turned allies against each other and royal brothers against brothers until Rakshasa and Malayaketu formed an alliance of five kings, which included soldiers from seven farther-away territories. A covert war of spying and deception ensued, orchestrated by the meddling Chanakya. Chanakya finally achieved his ends when the main enemy of the Mauryan Empire, Malayaketu, was tricked into destroying his primary allies and was subsequently deserted by his remaining allies. Ultimately, Rakshasa returned to become Chandragupta Maurya's

prime minister through Chanakya's trickery. He pledged allegiance to the Mauryan emperor, requesting a pardon for Malayaketu. Although it is impossible to confirm how much of this covert war is true, the contents of the *Arthashastra* point specifically to spying, assassination, and other elements of an ancient secret service as strategies to gain and retain power. The Mauryan rulers did not dismiss political subterfuge or even torture as outside of their prerogative.

Chanakya's work in installing the new Indian rulership was complete. Whether fiend or visionary, the royal advisor's role in history has been heralded as a watershed moment, as it united the Indian subcontinent and laid the groundwork for powerful economic strategies and international diplomacy, not to mention the birth of an expansive place of learning and culture. Although historically labeled as a scheming alchemist and master manipulator, he has also been attributed (at least in part) with the creation of the *Arthashastra* ("The Science of Material Gain"), a critically valuable treatise on socio-economics, politics, and governance that miraculously survived the ages. The *Arthashastra* is a valuable source of history and ancient culture, and its policies for economic development and statecraft are still relevant today. Along with the *Arthashastra*, the *Chanakya Niti*, a compendium of aphorisms, is another work attributed to Chanakya. Whether Chanakya held an altruistic and united vision for India or whether he was a self-interested and power-hungry oligarch (or perhaps something in between), he is viewed favorably in today's political world as a powerful thinker, philosopher, and diplomat who made significant headway in bringing the Indian subcontinent under a single rule. Chanakya states in his *Arthashastra* that it was the Nanda kings who engaged in duplicity, intrigue, and poor dharma (incorrect action) in the kingdom, which was restored by Chandragupta Maurya, who ruled with love, tolerance, and virtuosity and who was loved by his subjects. Although this statement is more than likely heavily biased, it shows his aptitude for spinning things so Chandragupta and the Maurya Empire came out on top.

Chanakya continued as a chief advisor (and possibly later as prime minister) to Chandragupta at the royal center of Pataliputra and then to his son, Bindusara. Legends say that before the end of his life, Chanakya left the royal court to die alone in isolation, leaving the *Arthashastra* behind. This historical treatise documented the requirements of a ruler to remain in power. While strategy, governance, and economics were discussed, spying, subterfuge, and assassination were described in equal measure. The creation of the Mauryan dynasty may have been part of a broader continental vision by its founders, but historians continue to ask the age-old question: Did the ends justify the means?

The origin of the name "Maurya" is not entirely clear. The most likely source of the name is from the Moriya clan of the Shakyas (greater Magadha culture) to which

Chandragupta belonged. The Buddha came from the noble Shakya clan, and they were considered the seed stock of both Buddhism and Jainism. Although many sources refer to the dynasty as Maurya, neither Ashoka's edicts nor contemporary Greek accounts use this name. There is also a possible connection to peacocks, which has been an ongoing symbol of Indian dynasties and currently India's national bird. Chandragupta Maurya is potentially thought to have been the son of the royal superintendent of peacocks (*mayura-poshaka*). The connection between peacocks and the place of the Mauryan kings (Magadha) continues through Buddhist tradition, which states that their ancestors settled "in the place of peacocks" and potentially built a city named *Moriya-nagara* using peacock-colored bricks. The word peacock is *mora* in Pali, an ancient local Magadha language, and *mayura* in Sanskrit. Regardless of whether the peacock was the source for the name Maurya or not, the peacock remained an important Mauryan symbol and appeared on architecture, such as the pillars of Ashoka and at the Buddhist center of Sanchi. It is likely that the peacock was the dynasty's emblem. Although Ashoka's inscriptions and the contemporary Greek accounts do not mention the name Maurya, it does appear on other Indian rock inscriptions from various time periods, such as the Junagadh rock inscription of Rudradaman from 150 CE and the Kuntala inscription from the 12th century CE. The name is also mentioned as a dynasty in various texts, for example, the Puranas and Buddhist, Jain, and Tamil literature.

Even though the specifics of Chandragupta Maurya's rise to power remain obscure, once the capital was stabilized, the newly installed Mauryan monarchy slowly but surely began gaining provinces. Almost two decades into his reign, the Mauryan Empire included a large swathe of land that stretched from modern-day Afghanistan in the west (including the Hindu-Kush) to the Bay of Bengal in the east. It extended south to include the fertile lands of the Indo-Gangetic Plain and most of the northern section of the Indian subcontinent except the main peninsula. Maurya was a single state governed from within and was establishing itself as an ancient superpower.

Chapter 3 – The Greco-Roman Affiliation

Once in power, Chandragupta Maurya continued his expansion of the empire and brought the northwestern territories under subjugation. Magadha had been more easily settled into its own kingdom for many generations, where smaller principalities had amalgamated into the relatively protected capital province. It was the northwestern extremities of the realm that had been more exposed. The Himalayas formed a boundary to the north with the Arabian Sea to the west, but the passes through the Hindu Kush (such as the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan) made Punjab vulnerable. Before the creation of the Mauryan Empire, Alexander marched his troops toward the Indian subcontinent. He was intent on "world" conquest. The rulers of Taxila and Abhisara surrendered, but King Parvata (Porus) of Punjab refused to do the same. During the Battle of the Hydaspes, on the banks of the river Jhelum, Porus was defeated but treated respectfully by Alexander. However, Alexander's forces refused to go any farther. Exhausted from warfare, having been absent from home for many years, and informed of the military might of Magadha, they mutinied. Alexander accepted temporary defeat and returned home to Babylon, where he unexpectedly died at the age of thirty-three, never to complete his dreamed-of domination of India. During his retreat, Alexander had made the necessary administrative arrangements for his conquered lands along the way.

Before his death, the Macedonian conqueror had left Seleucus I Nicator as his satrap (provincial governor or prefect) in charge of the northwestern territories that bordered the Magadhan lands. Alexander died shortly before the creation of the Maurya Empire, but Macedonian legions remained at the outposts of their conquered lands in a similar manner to the post-Roman Byzantine Empire. The vast area of what became the Seleucid Empire stretched from the borders of the Indian subcontinent in the east to include most of modern-day Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant.

The Persian provinces within modern-day Afghanistan, as well as the wealthy Kingdom of Gandhara and the Indus Valley states, had all submitted to Alexander before his death. Successive power struggles within the Macedonian leadership had left Seleucus I Nicator (358– 281 BCE) in control of what became the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucid Empire included Persia (Iran) and Bactria by 312 BCE. Seleucid went on to become the second most expansive empire in western Asia, rivaled only by the extent of Alexander's territory at the height of his domination. However, the easternmost reaches of the Seleucid Empire always remained in the Indus River Valley because of the Mauryan presence.

In 317 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya reverted his attention back to the Punjab area, specifically the occupied territories under the control of Seleucus I Nicator. By 316

BCE, Chandragupta laid claim to the whole of the northwestern subcontinent and had regained the Macedonian satraps taken by Alexander the Great up to the Indus River. Seleucus crossed the Indus to defend any further shrinkage of his territories in 305 BCE. However, after two years of cross-boundary skirmishes, which is known as the Seleucid-Mauryan War, the Treaty of the Indus was ratified with Chandragupta Maurya as the victor.

History does not suggest that the Seleucid-Mauryan War was a single pitched battle, and it is also likely that Seleucus I Nicator, like the Macedonian troops of Alexander's day, was reluctant to make a full onslaught against the might of the Indian subcontinent. Histories suggest that Chandragupta was always intent on taking back the northwestern territories lost during Alexander's time and that several Greek governors were killed when the Mauryan armies freed Indian land from the Macedonians.

Chandragupta not only took back the lands east of the Indus River but also further intimidated the enemy into relinquishing more territory. Fearing further invasion into his empire, Seleucus I Nicator was forced to submit to Chandragupta Maurya and eventually ceded an enormous tract of land west of the Indus, as well as a Macedonian princess in marriage, who may have been his daughter. Another version of the Treaty of the Indus states that it was the agreement that Macedonians and Indians could intermarry rather than the offering of a Macedonian princess.

The Mauryan hegemony had triumphed using the largest army of their time, which included legendary numbers of more than half a million men (foot soldiers), 30,000 cavalry, and 9,000 war elephants. Chandragupta sealed the alliance by gifting 500 war elephants and other supplies. In return, Chandragupta acquired portions of land known today as Afghanistan (the Hindu Kush) and the Balochistan province of Pakistan. These war elephants were instrumental in the expansion of the Seleucid Empire in the west and north, as well as in Seleucus's decisive fight of the Diadochi (conflicts fought between Alexander's successors), the Battle of Ipsus.

During an era of campaigning and territorial domination, this diplomatic exchange was a brilliant move to establish and maintain peaceful Indo-Greco relations for generations to come. The Seleucid Empire lasted until 63 BCE—over a century longer than the Mauryan Empire. The Treaty of the Indus allowed the Mauryan Empire to expand south and east with the knowledge that the exposed northwestern border had been secured with a lasting arrangement. The friendly relations established with the treaty lasted not only throughout Chandragupta's reign but also throughout the 140-year existence of the Mauryan Empire. There are even classical records that suggest that Chandragupta Maurya sent potions and gifts to Seleucus I Nicator, including aphrodisiacs!

Most importantly, the two leaders established an early form of international relations

with the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes (c. 350– 290 BCE). This Greek ambassador was responsible for writing a book named *Indika* and was posted to the Mauryan court for four years. Megasthenes had been born in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and was an ethnographer and diplomat.

Unfortunately, *Indika* in its entirety has been lost, but some of its contents have been made available through references by other ancient Greco-Roman historians and biographers, who occasionally directly paraphrase *Indika's* original content. *Indika* provides insight into the Mauryan Empire, in which Megasthenes describes Pataliputra as one of the first urban nodes (cities) in the world to have a highly efficient form of local self-government. He stated that Chandragupta's rule was marked by three parallel administrative systems. The first was overseeing the villages (rural life), including all aspects of the land and resources. The second arm managed city affairs, mostly involving trade and industry. The third section of the government concerned itself with the military and warfare.

Megasthenes goes on to describe a city fifteen by two kilometers in dimension protected by an immense timber palisade boasting 570 towers and 64 gates. Other evidence of official buildings at that time suggest influences borrowed from Persia and Macedonia. There is evidence of a pillared hypostyle hall in the capital adorned with gold and silver leaf and reports that Chandragupta wore fine embroidered muslins. Later, in Ashoka's time, sandstone often replaced the wood, upon which intricate designs were carved. *Indika* was also instrumental in describing ancient Indian gods, religions, and the geographical features of the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayas.

In approximately 292 BCE, Seleucus appointed his son Antiochos I as viceroy to the eastern provinces of the Seleucid Empire. Antiochos sent the Seleucid diplomat Deimakos to Bindusara's (Chandragupta's son and successor) court in a similar manner as Megasthenes had been sent to Chandragupta's court. Deimakos (also spelled as Deimachus) wrote extensively on the Indian subcontinent, as well as the Mauryan Empire, although his writings have been lost. The friendly relations with the Greek empires beyond Maurya's borders meant that the Khyber Pass, which links modern-day Afghanistan to Pakistan, was no longer considered a weak point. The pass now formed an important passage through which international trade in goods and culture could now move; in fact, it was encouraged.

Although Maurya existed before the Roman Empire (which began in 27 BCE), during Rome's 500 year-long domination of western Asia, many writers and philosophers traveled through its dominions, recording present and past history. These include such famous persons as Plutarch (c. 46– 120 CE), Pliny the Elder (c. 23– 79 CE), and Arrian (c. 86– 160 CE). These post-dynastic writings have served as valuable sources of information and ideas regarding the Maurya Empire. In terms

of India as a whole, the three most significant texts providing insight into ancient cultures are Strabo's (Greco-Roman, c. 64 BCE– 21 CE) *Geography*, Ptolemy's (Greco-Egyptian, 2nd century CE) *A Guide to Geography*, and a text called *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (a Greco-Roman travel book written in the 1st century CE). These combined surviving texts collectively describe thriving port cities, great urban nodes, and prosperous trade. Many texts refer to the mineral wealth of India, which would have included diamonds, pearls, and semi-precious stones. (Mining was clearly prevalent, and the extracted metals formed the basis for weaponry and other tools.) It seems that the Indians likewise sent representatives to Greek and Roman cities, mainly philosophers and sages, to share wisdom, knowledge, and learning. It was evident that the Indian culture was respected and revered but not entirely accepted, as the Indians had practices such as burning widows and the unfair caste system, which prevented organic movement of people through social classes and even intermarriage.

The Roman historian Justin, who wrote on the kings of Macedonia, had some fascinating things to say about Chandragupta Maurya, which was obviously not firsthand information. It is hard to say when Justin lived, but it was certainly not during the existence of the Maurya Empire. Scholars place his works as being written anywhere between the 2nd century and 3rd century.

Justin XV.4.12-13 and 19:

> India, after the death of Alexander, had assassinated his prefects [governors], as if shaking the burden of servitude. The author of this liberation was Sandracottos [Chandragupta Maurya], but he had transformed liberation in servitude after victory, since, after taking the throne, he himself oppressed the very people he has liberated from domination.
>
> Later, as he [Chandragupta] was preparing war against the prefects of Alexander, a huge wild elephant went to him and took him on his back as if tame, and he became a remarkable fighter and war leader. Having thus acquired royal power, Sandracottos possessed India at the time Seleucos was preparing future glory.

Once Chandragupta Maurya had established peace along the northwestern border of his lands, he turned his attention to capturing control of the east (except Kalinga) and the south (the Deccan Plateau). By the end of his reign, Chandragupta Maurya controlled the entirety of the northern length of the Indian subcontinent. Known to the Greek world as Sandrokottos (or Androcottus), Chandragupta Maurya created a royal court that became a bustling metropolis of learning and culture and provided the fertile environment from which Chanakya's famous political-economic treatise, the *Arthashastra*, was born. Maurya's capital, Pataliputra, was administered by six committees with five members apiece. The emperor had a council of ministers

(*amatya*), with Chanakya as his chief minister. Chandragupta set up and managed a strong central government and held power by dividing his dominion into manageable provinces, with each being overseen by a reigning prince. The central government maintained a further two dozen departments that were responsible for various social and economic responsibilities, such as aspects of trade, the marketing of goods, medical care and sanitation, demographic records, and foreign relations. This geopolitical arrangement continued to be effective in the reigns of his descendants and beyond.

Chandragupta was very involved in all matters of state and warfare, even relying on a network of spies to achieve his ends and, if it was called for, resorting to torture. In a pervasive era of suspicion and control, the first ruler of the Mauryan Empire had control over a huge army of troops (*maula*), which were all recruited, trained, and equipped by the state. *Atavika* (forest tribes) paid mercenaries (*bhrita*), and corporate guilds of soldiers (*shreni*) added to Maurya's military might. It has been recorded that Greek troops (*Yavanas*) assisted Chandragupta Maurya, particularly during the initial conquest of the Nanda dynasty. There were four sections (*chaturanga*) to the Mauryan army: infantry, cavalry (with catapults), chariots, and elephants. The war office of the central government employed thirty people to command the Mauryan army, as well as to see over aspects of the newly formed navy and other land transportation. The Roman writer Pliny estimated Chandragupta's army included 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 8,000 chariots, and 9,000 elephants. Mauryan warfare was described as being organized into formations (*vyuhas*) to suit the terrain and enemy. Great lengths were taken to train men and animals in the art of war, and both the emperors and princes were expected to be trained and to participate in battles. The Mauryan navy was mentioned little in the *Arthashastra*, but it is believed they were deployed to protect the coastlines and along the riverways to support the trade networks.

It was the Mauryan army that was all important. Soldiers were either scantily clad or wore quilted cotton shirts. They fought with bows and arrows, swords, and double-handed broadswords, shields (mostly made of hides), javelins, lances, axes, pikes, clubs, and maces. Thickly coiled turbans adorned their heads, as well as bands of cloth around their middles or chests for protection. Sometimes they wore tunics in winter or the drawer style kilt, tucked between the legs. The Mauryan's gargantuan army was funded by the vast resources and trade routes that they controlled, as well as by taxes raised from their expanding dominions. No matter the shady beginnings of Chandragupta Maurya's reign, there can be no doubt that the empire he handed to his son, Bindusara, had grown to mythical and all-powerful proportions. Unfortunately, Chandragupta's era of suspicion and control continued for over half a century, lasting into the reign of his grandson, Ashoka.

The Mauryan Empire was characterized by nine main rulers, with the first three being the longest and most powerful. After the conversion of the most determined of the Mauryan rulers (Ashoka) to the peaceful ways of Buddhism, the empire began to weaken and disband. History suggests that espionage and bloody warfare may have been the only methods to successfully achieve and maintain national unity. However, the Mauryan Empire remains a paradox since all its emperors practiced religious and spiritual tolerance as well as patronized culture and the arts. They were also instrumental in the development of religious buildings, shrines, and other architecture. Maurya's 136-year domination of the subcontinent was considered a stable time of economic prosperity and socioeconomic reforms and of the development of infrastructure and assistance for marginalized communities. The crime rate was low, and pomp and pageantry were prevalent, as there were many celebrations and festivals.

A unified empire came at a cost to its founding emperor, Chandragupta, who constantly thought that he would be assassinated. He took extreme measures to ensure he remained unharmed, using a prodigious network of spies to keep him informed of the activities in his provincial kingdoms and eventually turning to religion and spirituality to alleviate the pressures of a twenty-four year-long rule. Chandragupta finally turned to Jainism to provide himself with spiritual succor. Both Buddhism and Jainism are associated with non-violence (including vegetarianism), asceticism, and traditions that require adherence to strict codes of behavior and morals devoid of "sin." Jainism was a peaceful religion that amalgamated the established Hindu traditions with elements of the increasing influence of Buddhism, and it remains prevalent in India today. By the end of his life, Chandragupta eventually gave up rulership completely and lived as a Jain monk. He ultimately starved himself to death in 297 BCE as part of his religious tradition. There is confusion over whether he died in office or abdicated to his son, Bindusara. It seems more likely that he would have, at least in part, abdicated because of his deep association with the ascetic life at the end of his reign. Chandragupta is rumored to have traveled south to Karnataka on a pilgrimage to commit the Jain ritual of *sallekhana* (fasting to death).

Chapter 4 – Growth of the Empire

The Mauryan Empire continued with Chandragupta's son, Bindusara (r. c. 297– 273 BCE), who supposedly ascended the throne at just twenty-two years of age. Virtually nothing is known about the personal lives of the Mauryan kings except that it was an ancestral dynasty, meaning the nine rulers were all sons of their fathers or at least their next of kin. Bindusara was also known by the Sanskrit name of Amitraghata ("Slayer of Enemies") and the Greek name of Amitrochates. Like his father before him and his son—Ashoka—who succeeded him, Bindusara ruled for a very long time, approximately a quarter of a century. Bindusara is the least well known of the first three mighty Mauryan kings. His obscurity is most likely because he was not a stalwart advocate of either Jainism (like his father, Chandragupta) or of Buddhism (like his son, Ashoka); therefore, very few scriptural texts about his reign exist.

Bindusara is best remembered as the emperor who came between the two most well-known emperors. There are some Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditional accounts, as well as Greek references, to him. Evidence suggests that Bindusara was an intellectual with cosmopolitan tastes. Buddhist traditions describe Bindusara as the conqueror that significantly extended the Mauryan Empire by gaining the southern lands to include the extremities that his son Ashoka inherited—the Deccan Plateau between the Western and Eastern Ghats mountain ranges up to Karnataka. Some legends say that Bindusara captured sixteen new territories and was the ruler of the "land between two seas"—meaning the entire Indian Peninsula between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Bindusara also held the rest of the Indian subcontinent northwards as well as parts of Afghanistan and Balochistan (Pakistan). However, other accounts suggest Bindusara did not gain new lands but rather managed to hold what he had acquired from his father's reign by eliminating petty squabbles and uprisings. Whatever territorial gains Bindusara managed to make, he is definitely attributed with the consolidation and organization of the empire, thus continuing and building on his father's social and economic work.

Some scholars believe the mentions of Bindusara taking the Deccan Plateau is talking about the suppression of revolts and not the conquering of new land. The folklore of the southern kingdom of the Tamils (natives of the southernmost Tamil Nadu state) speaks of them repulsing Mauryan might, which was true for the duration of the Mauryan reign. The very southern peninsula of the Indian subcontinent remained independent, as the Tamils continued their dominance there, but the pillars of Ashoka clarify that the Tamils remained on friendly terms with the Maurya Empire. Although none of the Mauryan emperors managed to conquer the Tamil state at the southern tip of India, ancient Tamil literature, such as Sangam literature (apocryphal writings dating from 300 BCE), suggests that southern India

was invaded by Mauryan troops at certain times. Some verses describe Mauryan troops from Karnataka invading areas south of the Deccan Plateau. Other writings, including Greek sources, confirm such an invasion, although it seems that the Mauryans were defeated, and Tamil Nadu retained its independence under King Ilamchetchenni of the Cholas. The Tamil country, along with the Pandyas and the Cheras, was generally considered to be friendly in Mauryan times.

Another area eluded both Chandragupta and Bindusara—parts of modern-day northern Andhra Pradesh and its northeastern neighbor, Odisha, both on the eastern edge of the Maurya Empire. Collectively known by the ancient Indian name of Kalinga, this forested area was home to a powerful, independent tribe known as the Kalingas, who had also evaded rule by the Nandas. Kalinga was a large central-eastern fertile area stretching from the Bay of Bengal in the east and including approximately the territories of modern-day Odisha and some of northeastern Andhra Pradesh, as well as northern Telangana and some of Madhya Pradesh. Although the extent of Kalinga changed over time, the borders were the Godavari River to the south and the Mahanadi River to the north, with the western border shifting according to conquests over time but generally reaching as far into the hinterland as central India. Rich in natural resources, metals, and minerals, and with access to the sea, Kalinga remained independent into the rule of Ashoka. Kalinga was prosperous and strategically placed, as it was close to the capital in the north at Magadha and had good access to trade routes to eastern Asia.

Most accounts state that Chanakya was still an important part of the Mauryan court during Bindusara's reign and that Chanakya's treatise, the *Arthashastra*, continued to be a reference for statecraft into Ashoka's reign. Chanakya was thought to have continued in the role of prime minister at least during part of Bindusara's rule, and medieval writings recorded that he assisted Bindusara in conquering new lands, just as he had done for his father, Chandragupta Maurya. Several legends suggest that the northwestern territory of Taxila revolted twice during Bindusara's reign. His eldest son and heir to the throne, Susima (Sushima), was accused of maladministration in the first instance, and it was only during Ashoka's reign that the uprisings in Taxila were finally quelled.

There are legends that Bindusara had hundreds of councilors, two of which—Khallataka and Radhagupta—assisted in putting Ashoka on the throne after his death. During the height of the Mauryan Empire, there were twenty-seven superintendents (*adhyakshas*) who were responsible for economic activities from agriculture and mining to weaving and spinning. Irrigation facilities and reservoirs were a priority for agriculture, and the infrastructure for these was commissioned and overseen by the state. The standardization of weights and measures for trade and all other parts of the empire's economy was prevalent during the Mauryan

Empire. This enabled the administration to keep careful records of the national accounting system, particularly for the purposes of taxation. Taxes were gathered from all corners of the realm and from all strata of the social classes. State resources were not only taxed in coin but also in kind, and a great deal of time was given to the actual assessment of tax collection.

Megasthenes mentioned seven castes of the population: philosophers, soldiers, Brahmins (priests), craftsmen, herdsmen, farmers, and magistrates. This social arrangement seemed to be according to occupation rather than birth, although it is well known that a caste system based upon one's social class at birth was prevalent before and after the Maurya Empire. Although polygamy was practiced amongst the upper classes, the Hindu concept of Stridhana interestingly applied to women. Stridhana enabled women to work for their money and to retain their own wealth if they separated from their husbands—this specifically included marriage gifts. Megasthenes also noted that enforced slavery was not apparent in the subcontinent but that there were servants.

Bindusara continued good diplomatic relations with the Greek world and possibly extended his international connections as far as Egypt. As mentioned above, Seleucid I Nicator's son, Antiochos I, sent his ambassador, Deimakos (or Deimachus) of Plateia, to the Mauryan court. There is further evidence of Greek authors being welcomed in Bindusara's court (such as Iambulus), as well as a request made to Antiochos for a sophist (a classical Greek teacher), which was refused because they were not for sale. Deimakos was responsible for the creation of the treatise "On Piety" (*Peri Eusebeias*) and is known to have written extensively on India, although, sadly, these texts are lost. Like the other key figures of the Mauryan Empire, Bindusara enjoyed learning and foreign civilizations, and he maintained Hellenic international relations not just politically but also socio-culturally.

The Buddhist texts *Samantapasadika* and *Mahavamsa* suggest that Bindusara was a devotee of Brahmanism (historical Vedic religion), which was prevalent before the Maurya Empire. However, other records hint at Bindusara's connection with Jainism, Buddhism, and even the heterodox Ajivika. Ajivika was a fatalistic (*niyati*), determinist, and atheist religion that greatly appealed to the middle working classes. It died out in time and did not maintain the momentum that brought the religions of Jainism and Buddhism into the current era. If Bindusara adhered mostly to Ajivika, then any religious records relating to him would have been lost as these records were disappeared alongside the dissolution of Ajivika. However, there is a suggestion that Bindusara and his wife, Queen Subhadrangi (also mentioned as Queen Dharma or Queen Aggamahesi), were Brahmins of the Ajivika sect, putting them somewhere in between traditional Hinduism and Ajivika. There was a guru named Pingalavatsa (Janasana) who was associated with Bindusara and who was a

Brahmin, and Bindusara is also accredited with making several donations to Brahmin monasteries (*Brahmana-bhatto*).

Chandragupta Maurya's infrastructure projects continued through Bindusara's reign and well into Ashoka's. The founder of the Mauryan Empire had invested heavily in buildings and systems that would support trade and agriculture in his kingdom. Chandragupta had built roads, irrigation systems, reservoirs, temples, and mines. He had ensured the extension and protection of trade routes, both on land and via water. Chandragupta, with the assistance of Chanakya, also ensured the supply of food and other resources to his army and to his subjects. He created a time of prosperity and showed a profound sense of civic duty. These practices were continued by his son, Bindusara, as well as his grandson, Ashoka.

The Mauryans were known as great road builders. Megasthenes attributes Chandragupta with the establishment of a highway from the capital of Pataliputra all the way west to Taxila. Records indicate that a road network spread from the capital in all directions to the edges of the empire, which facilitated the movement of the army as well as trade. There were many manufacturing centers, especially for weapons, and the Mauryans practiced state ownership and control, as well as public-private partnerships with independently owned entities. They garnered taxes from the trade and manufacturing processes and used these to further fund the economy, the social infrastructure, the army, and the bureaucratic system.

The might of Maurya was self-perpetuating. The emperors had an enclosed region, as it was bordered by the ocean or the Himalayas on many sides, which they could better dominate and control. However, the rulers of Maurya exercised their rulership diplomatically and in accordance with the Eastern concept of dharma (*dhamma*), or the right actions that lead to a virtuous life. They preferred negotiations over war but were always prepared to go to battle if necessary. The Mauryans required total allegiance to the Maurya monarchy but still invested heavily in broad-based social structures and the relief of suffering. Various major and minor religions flourished under their protectorate, but the Mauryan rulers were not averse to managing a diverse network of undercover spies to ensure their dominance was maintained.

The legends about Bindusara's personal situation (a multitude of wives and children —some sources claim that he had 101 sons with 16 women) are not entirely believable, but it is very likely that he had several wives and plenty of children. Most indigenous chronologies suggest that the man who eventually rose to take power from his father, Ashoka, was not the most likely candidate. It doesn't seem that he was the oldest, strongest, or even the favorite. Most records place Bindusara's death at approximately 273 BCE, after which there was a four-year struggle for succession. Whatever the true circumstances of the change in power were, the delay suggests there was at least some confusion regarding ascendancy.

Bindusara’s twenty-four-year reign was the second of three extraordinarily lengthy rules. Maurya’s continuation for almost a century and a half could well be attributed to the collective reigns of Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara, and Ashoka, which collectively totaled almost ninety years. For ancient times, which were full of struggle and violence, three long reigns in a row were quite remarkable.

Chapter 5 – Imperial Unity under Ashoka the Great

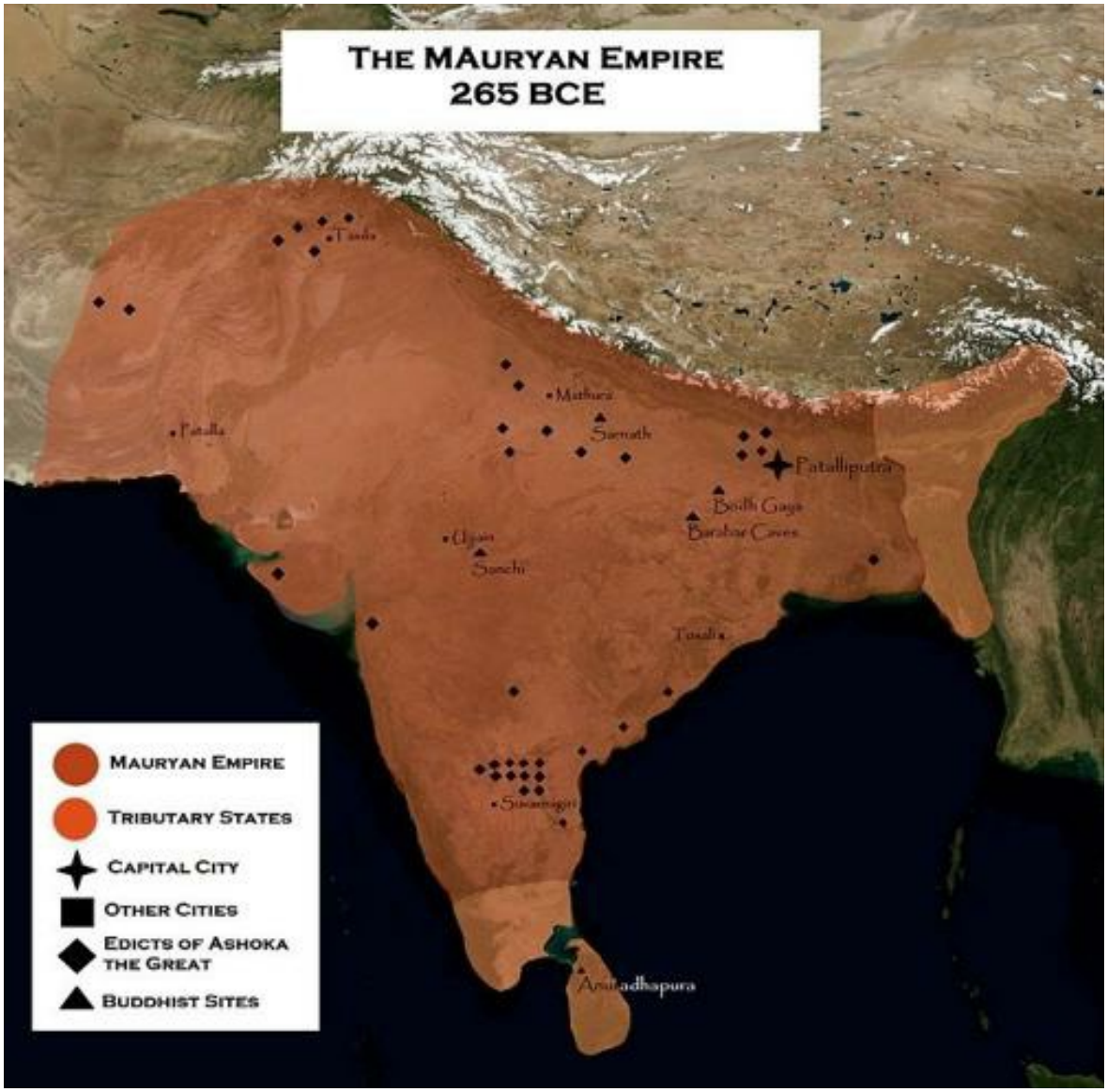
Of Bindusara's many children, Ashoka (Asoka, Aśoka, or Ashoka the Great, also known as *Piyadasi* and *Devanampiya*) (c. 304– 232 BCE) had not been the obvious candidate for the throne. Ashoka's mother was Subhadrangi, and it is believed that she bore at least two of Bindusara's sons. Legends say that he murdered his rival siblings in order to take the throne for himself. This presumed infighting (whether it resulted in murder or not) accounts for the four-year gap between the end of Bindusara's reign and the beginning of Ashoka's. Several different legendary sources proclaim that Ashoka was fated to rule and that he was even predestined by the Hindu gods (*devatas*) as a great ruler before birth. Certain tales clarify that Ashoka had one main rival to the throne, his brother Susima (Sushima), who had not been successful in getting the area of Taxila under control when his father, Bindusara, died. Potentially, this failure, as well as Ashoka's successes in governing the northwest as an official royal viceroy, were what led to Ashoka's triumph over Susima. Legend also suggests that Susima was not popular amongst the courtiers, and although he was the legitimate heir to the throne, it was held for Ashoka instead. There is also the possibility that Bindusara peacefully handed over rulership after retiring!

[4] An artist's impression of Ashoka the Great, the third emperor of the Mauryan Empire of India, who ruled for almost four decades and spread the peaceful messages of Buddhism

throughout the empire once he had turned from engaging in bloody warfare.

At first, Ashoka achieved dominance through warfare, continuing the bloody path of the ancestral lineage set by his father, Bindusara, and grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya. However, even though he had been raised a Hindu, his violent and empirical approach to expanding and maintaining the empire eventually gave way to the peaceful and non-violent way of Buddhism and the cosmically ordered way of *dhamma* (cosmic law or right action). *Dhamma*, or dharma, is a concept of several religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and other ascetic Indian religions. There isn't an exact translation for the concept of *dhamma* in Western languages, and even within traditional Indian religions, it has slightly different connotations.

Ashoka's reign began in c. 268 BCE, lasting for almost four decades until 232 BCE. His influence on the Mauryan Empire brought forth the golden age of Maurya, and he also extended and marked the boundaries of the realm at its most expansive. Spanning a geographical area of more than five million square kilometers across modern-day India and Iran (Persia), the Mauryan Empire existed as the largest geopolitical region the Indian subcontinent has ever known. This expansive empire boasted fifty-sixty million people at its zenith under the rulership of Ashoka.



[5] The Mauryan Empire at its greatest extent, showing the capital in Magadha, Pataliputra, in the northeast and Taxila in the northwest. Maurya included most of modern-day India (except for the tip of the peninsula), as well as large tracts of modern-day Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Bengal), Bhutan, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and parts of China. Maurya covered an area of more than five million square kilometers (almost two million square miles).

The Buddhist manuscript, *Divyavadana*, describes Ashoka's mother (Subhadrangi) as the daughter of a Brahmin from present-day Bihar. Apparently, she was kept away from her husband due to palace intrigue until she had a son. Once she gave birth to a son, her position was elevated, and she could be closer to the king. She named her son Ashoka ("without sorrow.") Ashoka spent his childhood in the royal court, and as the potential heir to the throne, his days were full of hunting and lessons on statecraft. He was highly educated and even learned martial arts. As a teenager, Ashoka was given the monumental task of governing some of the outlying

regions of the Mauryan Empire—Taxila (in Gandhara) and Ujjain (northwestern territories). His father, Bindusara, seems to have had great faith in him since he was about twenty years of age when he was sent out to deal with an uprising in Taxila. The populace was complaining about oppression by corrupt high officials. This was a very important region to the Mauryan Empire because it was highly prosperous and also on one of the main trade routes of the Uttarapatha (main central) highway that linked the capital of Pataliputra with the northwest. Ashoka marched an army of troops 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) northwest to deal with the uprising. He seems to have used his considerable powers of negotiation to quell the uprising and deal with the officials, and he is reported to have shown mercy to the people who laid down their arms. Ashoka was also made the governor of Malwa in Ujjain (central-western Maurya Empire), which was an important center of learning and trade. Ashoka's own rock edicts provide evidence that he (or another Mauryan prince) served as the viceroy in Ujjain.

It was while he was at Ujjain that Taxila revolted again. On this second occasion, his father, Bindusara, sent his other son, Susima, to deal with the uprising. Bindusara fell ill during the campaign and ordered Susima to be recalled. Legends tell, however, that Ashoka was the preferred candidate for regency at that time and that he returned to Pataliputra before his brother and was crowned (or crowned himself!) in his brother's absence upon Bindusara's death. Susima had still been in Taxila when Bindusara died and was delayed in returning. Some legends suggest that Bindusara had wanted to send Ashoka after his brother to Taxila, but through manipulation, Ashoka or Bindusara's ministers who favored Ashoka kept him in the capital so he could immediately ascend the throne upon Bindusara's death. There are legendary rumors that Ashoka had ninety-nine brothers and that he killed them all in order to ascend the throne, which is quite unlikely. Scholars suggest that he did have at least Susima and two other brothers killed, but they believe his youngest brother, Vitashoka, renounced any claim to the throne and became a Buddhist monk.

What is clear from the legends is that, at least politically, Ashoka was the favored candidate and that he was maneuvered into position by ministers according to their own agendas. Since there is a four-year gap between the end of Bindusara's reign and the beginning of Ashoka's, it is evident that not only was there a likely power struggle but also that the Pataliputra ministers had a long intercession in which to be in charge themselves. It may be that the succession to the Mauryan throne was purposefully obfuscated and delayed by Mauryan governors to allow themselves time to become more powerful and enforce their own ends. Also, although apocryphal evidence does not provide a factual account of Ashoka's life, the repetitious elements do suggest some truth or at least a widely accepted cultural belief system that may have been prevalent at the time. One of these elements was

that Ashoka was destined to rule by the gods. He was considered a *chakravartin* (universal ruler). Not only did his influence extend throughout the extent of Maurya and to many territories beyond its borders, but he was also believed to be in charge of the *Yaksha* territory located above the earth and the *Naga* territory located below the earth.

There is evidence in Buddhist texts to suggest that Ashoka only ascended the throne in his thirties, meaning his role as a prince and viceroy of the outer territories was a long one. Once he was in position, Ashoka developed the palace and began using stone as the primary building material, most likely doing so with the assistance of foreign craftsmen. He began creating gardens and sculptures that disguised dark corners set aside for torture and plotting. Like most ancient rulers, the Mauryan emperors were autocrats and not sympathetic to anybody who challenged their rule. The empire was divided into four main provinces. The capitals were Tosali in the east, Taxila in the north, Ujjain in the west, and Suvarnagiri in the south. The emperor held absolute power and appointed officials to run all aspects of the state, as well as the large and pervasive espionage system. Buddhist texts suggest that Ashoka was both cruel and hedonistic before his conquest of Kalinga and his conversion to Buddhism. The pleasure-seeking Ashoka was known as "Kamashoka," the unkind Ashoka was "Chandashoka," and the enlightened spiritual Ashoka was "Dhammashoka."

There are very unpleasant legends of Ashoka's cruelty, but these cannot be verified and could potentially be inaccurate and unfair. Whatever barbarism Ashoka displayed upon his ascension and within the first decade of his rule, it was somewhat offset by his love for the people. His Rock Edict V refers to officers who were in charge of caring for his brothers' and sisters' families and all his other relatives. Ashoka's edicts consistently confirm his love for society, family, and community, and they state he was instrumental in keeping the social fabric of the community together and spreading family values. Although Buddhist texts like to greatly exaggerate Ashoka's change from despot to divine deliverer through the medium of Buddhism, it seems unlikely that Ashoka would have changed that much throughout his lifetime. It is perhaps more moderate to assume that he simply grew up, became more conscious of what conquering did to the world around him, and chose a different path. There is evidence that he was a sensible and level-headed young man, as well as a Buddhist, during his time as governor in Ujjain. The first decade of his reign in Pataliputra may have seen him wielding more power than usual and fulfilling his role according to the *Arthashastra*, but it is still very likely that he was at least a nominal Buddhist at this point in his life and that he already had wives and children. Ashoka's edicts express regret only over his success in the Kalinga War and don't reference more horrifying behavior as suggested in the

Buddhist legends. Both his cruelty and the presumption of him being a divine leader seem to be an exaggeration.

At the beginning of his reign, Ashoka was guided by the *Arthashastra,* which followed the philosophical worldview of Charvaka—a completely material worldview devoid of supernatural events. The *Arthashastra* gives some insight into the seemingly dichotomous approach of the Mauryan emperors, who used bloody warfare, political subterfuge, and spiritual principles in equal measure. This treatise appears to give the king unlimited power to gain and maintain control according to his prerogative, and paradoxically, this control is condoned through the absolution of a higher power and the emperor's *dhamma*. The seven broad categories (limbs or *saptanga*) of rulership are listed in the *Arthashastra* as kingship, administration and governance (bureaucracy and the ministers), territory (including the population), defense and fortification (protection), treasury (including taxes), military and coercive authority (including subterfuge, spying, and warfare), and allies. Along with describing the mechanics of political strategy and general state manipulation, the *Arthashastra* provides some careful and frightful descriptions of how to poison people, how to light one's body on fire without getting burnt, and how to create an army of spies (including the use of honey traps as well as child monks)! It is clear that the first half-century of the Mauryan Empire was rife with intrigue, suspicion, and covert intelligence networks in order to maintain power. The seeds sown by the immoral but pragmatic Chanakya lasted for generations.

It seems that there was a system of committees that administered the lands from the capital in Pataliputra and that there was a hierarchal structure for each sub-region. The central revenue department ensured the collection of taxes and administration of the treasury. The military department was described by Megasthenes as having six subdivisions: navy, transport and provisions, foot soldiers, horses, chariots, and war elephants. The espionage department managed a network of secret agents, and the police department had headquarters in all major areas. There were jails as well as holding areas. The network of provincial and local administrators was comprised of magistrates, tax collectors, governors, accountants, and scribes.

The municipal administration included officials responsible for city administration, agriculture, markets, ships, tolls, iron and mining, and weights and measures. A municipal or city council was made up of thirty commissioners and was divided into six committees. The first committee was responsible for wages and provided goods; the second committee made arrangements for foreign dignitaries, tourists, and businessmen; the third committee kept records and registrations; the fourth committee looked after manufactured goods and the sale of commodities; the fifth committee regulated trade and related licenses and measurements; and the sixth committee collected taxes. There were also officers who assisted with infrastructure

maintenance, socioeconomic affairs, and other civic responsibilities (including educational institutions). From the capital, foreign affairs were handled, as well as the census of births and deaths, industries, trade, manufacture, and taxes. Maurya was divided into smaller regions, which were overseen by a crown prince (*Yuvaraj*), a chief priest (*Purohita*), the commander-in-chief (*Senapati*), and the remaining civil servants (*Amatya*). The official head of a village was called a *Gramika*, and the official head of a town was a *Nagarika*. The head of a provincial administration was the royal prince (*Kumara*), who governed as the emperor's representative. The provincial royal princes were assisted by a council of ministers and the *dhamma-mahamattas* (the *dhamma* officers of morality instituted after Ashoka's conversion). The provincial hierarchy was repeated at an imperial level within the royal court of the capital.

The forested and tribal province of Kalinga (modern-day Odisha and some of Andhra Pradesh) in the northeast of the subcontinent had eluded both Ashoka's father and grandfather. Although they were surrounded by the Mauryan Empire (except for the Bay of Bengal to their east), the chieftains of Kalinga refused to subjugate themselves to Mauryan rule for over fifty years. When Ashoka took control, his first task was to conquer the resistant Kalinga region in order to make the Maurya Empire complete. In the seventh year of his reign (c. 261 BCE), Ashoka led Maurya to victory by waging one of the bloodiest battles India and the world have ever known. Up to 300,000 Indians lost their lives or were wounded (both soldiers and civilians), with many captured and enslaved. Hundreds of thousands of animals also lost their lives in the Kalinga War, which Ashoka ultimately deeply regretted. He also expressed regret over the pain, suffering, and disruption caused to holy people and regular people, as hundreds of thousands of Kalingas were deported or sold into slavery afterward.

Recent evidence indicates that on the eve of Ashoka's onslaught, Kalinga was organized into a number of prosperous urban nodes. The modern-day area of Sisupalgarh-Dhauli was the likely location of Ashoka's main point of attack. Ashoka's Dhauli edict a few kilometers from this point, as well as evidence of an ancient, pillared hall of stone monoliths (of palatial proportions), indicate that Dhauli was significant. According to excavations, it is likely that Sisupalgarh, which was one of the biggest cities in the world at the time, was one in a network of ancient cities that stretched for 400 kilometers (around 250 miles) along the Kalinga coast. They all had moats and were fortified. The urban nodes were also linked via a network of waterways. The Kalinga settlements were orderly, planned, well-situated, and wealthy. It is no wonder that Maurya needed to incorporate this independent state into its vastness, as the emperors needed their resources, wealth, and access to trade routes to maintain their pan-Indian empire.

However, the rulership of Kalinga before Ashoka's attack is mysterious. There are no records of a government or monarchy during the Mauryan era or even the preceding eras. Evidently, Kalinga was well governed and peaceful, and it was mentioned by Pliny the Elder as having tribes living close to the sea with a royal city. How they managed this extraordinary independence, tranquility, and affluence remains undocumented. The most likely solution is that Kalinga existed as a confederacy of tribal chiefs who worked toward a common cause and protected themselves as such. There appears to have been stability in Kalinga, and their nonchalance to the might of Maurya may have been the cause of Ashoka's determination to possess it. There is no absolute certainty as to where the Kalinga War was fought, but the most likely site is near Dhauli, overlooking the Daya River, which was said to have turned red with blood during the battle. However, the rock edicts in the vicinity do not mention the battle. An edict in Kandahar, thousands of kilometers away at the northwestern extremity of the Mauryan realm (in modern-day Afghanistan), has Ashoka relieving his conscience for the death, destruction, and mayhem he caused in taking Kalinga.

Ashoka's Rock Edict XIII:

> Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi [as Ashoka was referred to, and also "Devanampiya"], conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and more died [from other causes]. After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas. Indeed Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered…the killing, death or deportation of a hundredth, or even a thousandth part of those who died during the conquest of Kalinga now pains Beloved-of-the-Gods. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible.

Once Ashoka the Great acquired Kalinga, he made it part of his Mauryan dominion, establishing a fortification within the conquered lands and eventually its own system of government that adhered to the Mauryan civil hierarchy. Ashoka held the largest extent ever covered by the sprawling Mauryan Empire, but in time, he regretted it deeply. Despite Ashoka's remorse, Kalinga remained under Mauryan rulership throughout Ashoka's reign and was divided into a northern and southern section with Dhauli (ancient Tosali) as the capital of the north. Unusually, the subjugation of the Kalinga region was the catalyst for Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, which took place eleven years after he took power. The bloodshed and enslavement of the

people during the Kalinga War convinced Ashoka that there must be another way to geopolitical and cultural unification. Although legends suggest that he experienced an epiphany on the battlefield after the Kalinga War, it is most likely that his full conversion to non-violence and adherence to the gentle ways of *dhamma* happened more gradually over the years. It is also unclear whether Emperor Ashoka was already acquainted with Buddhism before Kalinga and simply began adhering to it more or if he only discovered Buddhism after the devastation of his final battle. If the legends of his love connection to Devi (his first wife) at Sanchi during his governance of Ujjain are correct, then he was acquainted with Buddhism before the Kalinga War. As mentioned above, the most reasonable conclusion is that Ashoka was a nominal Buddhist before the Kalinga massacre but was changed by his experience of the war and began transitioning to a practicing Buddhist after the war.

Buddhism was founded sometime between the 6th and early 4th century BCE by an ancient Indian enlightened master who became known as the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), who was a part of a long line of divinely chosen Buddhas. The Buddha taught peace through the creation of inner discipline and the relief of suffering by abnegating human desire. The Buddha described an eight-fold path to inner holiness through the practice of "rightness" in all human thought and behavior. He preached that through meditation, discourse, humility, and self-denial, humanity could reach a peaceful state known as nirvana. The pillars of the Buddha's teachings have been encapsulated as the Four Noble Truths, which describe the human condition of suffering and the path through suffering to enlightenment. In time, Buddha's teachings spread throughout central and eastern Asia by monks who traveled and taught these truths.

Ashoka began instituting the life-enhancing (*ahimsa*) ways of Buddhism into the royal court and into his administration of the empire. He used Buddhism and the concept of *dhamma* as his state policy in a new and exceptionally inspiring form of kingship. He wanted to rule his conquered world through love and faith and by preventing all cruelty to humans and animals alike. The Kalinga massacre had left hundreds of thousands of his people displaced or in servitude under hard labor. Part of Ashoka's deepening spirituality was to end all forms of slavery and indentured labor. He also put a ban on unnecessary hunting and any violent sports, including humans and animals alike, notoriously banning the killing of almost all animals in his royal kitchens for curries. He did allow a few choice animals to be killed each year for special occasions. Ashoka gave up conquest entirely and instead made pilgrimages to holy Buddhist sites, encouraging those he met to practice tolerance and humanity. He sent Buddhist emissaries in the form of male and female monks throughout the Indian subcontinent as well as farther afield (as far as the Mediterranean and Egypt in the west and south Asia in the east) to spread the word

of Buddhism and perform rites for those who wished to convert.

Certain historians promulgate that there was a distinct difference between Ashoka's application of *dhamma* and his Buddhist inclinations, suggesting that his concept of *dhamma* was very simplistic and disconnected from the intricacies of being a practicing ascetic. Ashoka's concept of *dhamma* related to generalized standards of behavior and moral attitudes that were thought to be drawn from both Hindu Brahmanism and Buddhist teachings. Ashoka himself was both a monk and a monarch during his reign, and he not only promulgated the policy of *dhamma* but also perpetually strove to embody it. His messages to his subjects were designed to increase general social responsibility, equality, and tolerance. In accordance with the balanced, non-interfering, and non-attached concept of *dhamma*, Ashoka did not enforce his lofty ideals but rather spread edicts to persuade and enlighten his people.

Although the spread of Buddhism might not seem revolutionary today, it must be remembered that at the time of Ashoka's reign, it was a heterodox (outside of the orthodox Brahmanism of the Hindu religion) and obscure religion. It was Ashoka who helped Buddhist principles to gain traction in Asia and eventually in Southeast Asia, where it is prevalent today. Brahmans had acquired considerable power in previous generations through their control of ritualistic practices and the acquisition of resources in the form of payments for spiritual services. Still, there were many tribal areas that did not practice any of the major religions but rather believed in localized traditions. The vast expanse of the Mauryan Empire was a melting pot of religions and spiritual beliefs, and the emperor used edicts to create a common and unbiased language of unity and harmony. Ashoka's edicts did not aim to convert his subjects but rather to create an atmosphere of tolerance and trust in support of national harmony.

[6] A 1st century BCE/CE stone relief from Sanchi (a north-central Buddhist site) of Emperor Ashoka Maurya (Piyadasi) on his chariot visiting the Nagas (supernatural beings) at Ramagrama (holy Nepalese Buddhist site).

Ashoka believed in the everyday practices of honesty, compassion, truthfulness, mercy, benevolence, and the application of "many good deeds," amongst other virtues, which he included in his edicts. Interestingly, Ashoka's proclamations did not extol particular philosophies or religious dictates and methods of worship. Furthermore, he was tolerant of all of Maurya's religions and did not insist that the people convert or believe in Buddhism. The emperor traveled to preach in the rural areas of his dominions about the Buddhist belief system and advocated the equalizing of social hierarchies and the fair dispensation of punishments.

Ashoka's newfound path of peacefulness meant he ruled with mercy and justice, and he sought to institute laws that benefited everyone and not just the upper echelons of society. In his thirteenth regnal year (c. 255 BCE), Ashoka used the established civil servant network and designated some of the high officers as "dhamma ministers," who were employed to administer over the particularly weak and outlying communities of the realm. These *dhamma-mahamattas* were specifically employed to teach and enforce the rules of *dhamma* to the general population. In a revolutionary move, Ashoka the Great advocated against cruelty to animals, even going so far as to ban hunting and commission animal hospitals. Ashoka's aim was to relieve the suffering of all living things under his command; however, at the same time, this unusual leader retained his army, slaves, and the inherited attitude of sovereignty over an expansive dominion. Ashoka held Maurya peacefully but firmly for the remainder of his rule.

Pataliputra, the capital of the empire, reached the pinnacle of its splendor and fame during Ashoka's reign. During its height, Pataliputra stretched for 15 kilometers (nine miles) along the Ganges River, with a width of 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles). The perimeter of Pataliputra measured 35 kilometers (22 miles). It was shaped like a parallelogram, and it had a surface area of 25 square kilometers (15.5 miles). (The perimeter of ancient Rome measured 14 kilometers—8.5 miles—at its maximum.) Most importantly, Ashoka introduced stone as a building material rather than the wood of his ancestors. When Ashoka turned to Buddhism, he built monasteries and erected pillars with his edicts within the capital. Pataliputra is recognized as the birthplace of Buddhism. Its reputation as the "City of Flowers" was enhanced by Greco-Roman writers, such as Aelian (Roman author, c. 175–235 AD), who described Indian palaces as being far superior to those of Persia, with parks full of tame peacocks. Ashoka, in particular, was known as a great builder and likely imported foreign craftsmen during his establishment of the capital. Relics of Persian influences from the architecture of the Mauryan period confirm the likelihood of foreign craftsmen being used, particularly after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire after its conquest by Alexander the Great.

During the Mauryan period, Pataliputra was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of between 150,000 and 400,000 people. Pataliputra had been established as a small fort town in approximately 500 BCE by the Magadhan ruler Udayin. The water fort (*jaldurga*) was built at the confluence of the Ganges, Gandaki, and Son Rivers. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, it continued to be a vital capital for subsequent dynasties, such as the Gupta (c. 320–550 CE) and the Pala (c. 750–1200 CE). Pataliputra's strategic positioning in the center of northeast India at the confluence of these three rivers ensured its domination over riverine trade across the Indo-Gangetic Plain. In addition, it became a powerful center for commerce and learning. During Chandragupta Maurya's reign, the palace of Pataliputra had been a group of several buildings, including a large, pillared hall. Eighty pillars, seven meters high, were arranged in rows, dividing the hall into a number of smaller bays. According to Megasthenes, the gilded pillars were adorned with golden vines and silver birds. The buildings were situated in an expansive park filled with fish ponds and embellished with ornamental trees and shrubs. During Ashoka's period, much of the wood architecture was replaced with stone, and the art and architecture received the Mauryan polish treatment that made it shine like a mirror. Archaeological evidence has produced lofty stone pillars, lion thrones, other colossal figures, and exquisite railings (ornate fences and gateways) for the Buddhist stupas (mound-like structures built for worship and meditation). Ashoka's reign marked the beginning of the Buddhist school of architecture.

By the end of Ashoka's reign, he governed the entire area of the Indian subcontinent

extending from the Bay of Bengal in the east up to and including the Hindu Kush (Afghanistan) in the west, as well as the modern-day areas of Bangladesh (former Bengal), Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, and parts of China and Iran. It was only the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula (modern-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala) that was not under his rule. At the height of the Mauryan Empire, political unity and military security ensured a broad-based economic system that benefited trade, commerce, and agriculture. The petty tribal squabbles of the pre-Mauryan period, in which internecine warfare had prevented the establishment of a single cultural and economic hegemony, had given rise to Chanakya's original vision—one of a united pan-Indian superpower with a disciplined central authority. The Mauryan army created internal peace and economic security by getting rid of gangs of robbers, local private armies, and any chieftains that threatened the overarching power of Maurya. Local industries and individuals were required to pay homage and taxes to the Mauryan regency, but history indicates that this was to their long-term benefit, as well as that of Maurya, in terms of the economy, personal safety, and social security. The sense was that as long as all regions and peoples within the empire submitted to Maurya's beneficent imperial domination, all would be well.

Chapter 6 – Consolidation of Maurya: The Edicts of Ashoka

It is not precisely known why Ashoka specifically chose Buddhism as his spiritual path except that he had made an association with the Buddhist monks Upagupta and Moggaliputta Tissa, who may have been the same person, and was also inspired by a male monk named Nigrodha (Nyagrodha), whose tranquil and fearless appearance impressed him. (Texts suggest another male monk named Samudra.) Apocryphal evidence states that Nigrodha taught Ashoka a lesson on earnestness (*appamada*), which prompted Ashoka to seek further teachings on Buddhism. He became an *upasaka* of Buddhism (an advocate who does not take the vows of a monk or nun; in other words, a devout lay follower). It was during regular visits to the Buddhist monastery Kukkutarama at Pataliputra that he met and became an adherent of the practicing monk Moggaliputta Tissa, moving deeper into Buddhism through his temple visits. Ashoka most likely chose Buddhism because he seemed to be looking for an applicable life philosophy, including a way of being that he could simultaneously apply to rulership. The equally passive, deeply spiritual, and non-violent ways of Jainism may have been too ascetic to practice and simultaneously rule as the emperor. Buddhism provided an abundance of spiritual teachings and an entire universal philosophy conducive to those who could not become a monk or a nun—this belief system seemed more appropriate for Ashoka, who remained a highly involved and attentive ruler for the remainder of his life.

Regardless of which monk first inspired Ashoka, he clearly had an abundance of Buddhist influences around him and is thought to have had a succession of Buddhist teachers. There is also a legend that tells of Ashoka falling in love with a merchant's daughter, Devi (also known as Vedisa- or Vidisha-Mahadevi), who lived near Sanchi (the site of an important Buddhist temple complex) at Besnagar (modern-day Vidisha). Sanchi was a north-central hilltop area on the way to the capital of Ujjain, Avanti, to which Ashoka had been assigned to govern in his youth. It is rumored that Devi was a Buddhist (and also possibly a princess of Ujjain) and that she was instrumental in Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism. Other Buddhist sources suggest she was a descendant of Gautama Buddha and belonged to the spiritual Shakya clan. Records suggest that Devi became Ashoka's wife along with at least two others—Asandhimitra and Karuvaki—but he possibly could have had up to four different wives. Records suggest that Ashoka's son, Mahinda, was ordained into Buddhism at the age of twenty when his father had been on the throne for six years. This would mean that Ashoka was married and producing heirs well before his reign as emperor and that he was also likely a Buddhist well before he ascended the throne. Devi may have introduced Ashoka to Buddhism, but it is also possible that he was already an adept of Buddhism when he met her and that they simply shared a love for it together. Buddhism was a minor heterodox sect at that time in India, along with

Jainism, Ajivika, and Charvaka, and vied with the mainstream orthodox *Sanatan Dharma* (“Eternal Order”) of Hinduism.

Some of the main sources of information for the Mauryan period come from Buddhist texts, such as the *Mahavamsa* (a 5th-century CE Sri Lankan chronicle written in Pali by a Buddhist monk) and the *Dipavamsa* (the 4th-century CE “Chronicle of the Island”—this is the oldest historical record of Sri Lanka). These documents mention Buddhist missions sent to Sri Lanka by Ashoka, including an important visit by his daughter, Theri Sangamitta. The 2nd-century CE Buddhist “Narrative of Ashoka” (the *Ashokavadana*, which is a part of the greater *Divyavadana*) includes legends about Ashoka and his role in spreading Buddhism, as does the Jatakas (dated c. 300 BCE–c. 400 CE), which is a voluminous compendium of poems and prose that assist with depicting the socioeconomic conditions in India at the time. However, caution must be applied when referencing these works because the writers were not contemporaries of Ashoka’s day. The religious texts were written in retrospect by adherents of the faith who heralded Ashoka as a great Buddhist king.

Ashoka continued the establishment of Buddhism in his empire through over forty edicts, which can be found throughout modern-day India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. These edicts were either written on tall, polished sandstone pillars or on cave walls, stone slabs, and stones in Prakrit or other local languages closely associated with Sanskrit (Brahmi, Magadhi, Kharosthi, and even Aramaic and Greek). Ashoka strategically positioned these edicts at religious places, at intersections, and along byways where many people would see them and even repeated some of the edicts, such as number XIII, which was his regret over conquering Kalinga. Many of the edicts still survive today and describe his ascetic life as a non-violent Buddhist committed to the moral and peaceful leadership of his people. The edicts describe the reforms he made as a leader and his wish for the Mauryan people to follow his example, but they do not describe the philosophies of Buddhism, nor did they attempt to convert his people to his religion.

Instead, the edicts encouraged people to emulate Ashoka’s newfound spiritual approach and to take responsibility for their actions. His new foundation of leadership through righteousness placed the moral and spiritual wellbeing of his people first. Through his edicts, Ashoka dispensed advice like the Buddha before him. In general, Ashoka’s edicts can be separated into four categories: major and minor rock edicts and major and minor pillar edicts. The following edicts attributed to Ashoka have been unearthed throughout the Mauryan Empire: fourteen major rock edicts expounding the principles of *dhamma*; two Kalinga (Odisha) rock edicts describing a new administration after the Kalinga War; minor rock edicts describing Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism, as well as his personal history and more on

dhamma; thirteen pillar edicts (major and minor), which act as appendices to the rock edicts and further propose Buddhism and *dhamma*; and three cave edicts describing Ashoka's tolerant attitude (at Barabar Caves, the oldest surviving rock-cut caves in India).

In general, the minor edicts are religious and expound Buddhism, while the major edicts are moral and political and speak more broadly of *dhamma*. While the minor edicts go into some detail regarding Buddhism, such as mentioning Buddha (and previous Buddhas before him) and details regarding the Buddhist communities and scriptures, the major edicts never mention Buddhism and are far more concerned with establishing law and order throughout the Maurya Empire. The major edicts were spread widely to the extents of Maurya, while the minor edicts were centered in mainland India, with many in the south or along the edges of Kalinga. All of the pillar edicts (major and minor) were located in central northern India at the site of Buddhist monasteries and other holy places, specifically in the modern-day Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana. Some of the Ashokan pillars do not have edicts. (The discrepancy in content of writings and geographical location, as well as the fact that the major edicts are far superior in quality, has led some scholars to believe that the major and minor edicts were not necessarily created by the same ruler, but this is a topic of debate.)

Records state that Ashoka began establishing his edicts to spread the idea of *dhamma* in his twelfth regnal year. His officers were already employed in five-year-long inspection tours of their specific jurisdictions, which included the spread of *dhamma*. The fourteen major rock edicts are fascinating in their content, as they include the prohibition of animal sacrifices; measures of social welfare and infrastructural development; respect for Brahmins, Sramanas (ascetic laborers), and elders; the *dhamma mahamattas* (*dhamma* ministers) and their duties; religious tolerance; *Dhammayatras* (evangelizing missions and tours); the abolition of meaningless ceremonies and rituals; the use of *dhamma* rather than war in conquest; *dhamma* policy; the Kalinga War; and inspiring people to lead a religious life. Overall, Ashoka's messages were of love, tolerance, piety, discipline, and the elimination of cruelty to others and superstition.

As an example, the Rock Edict VI of Ashoka states:

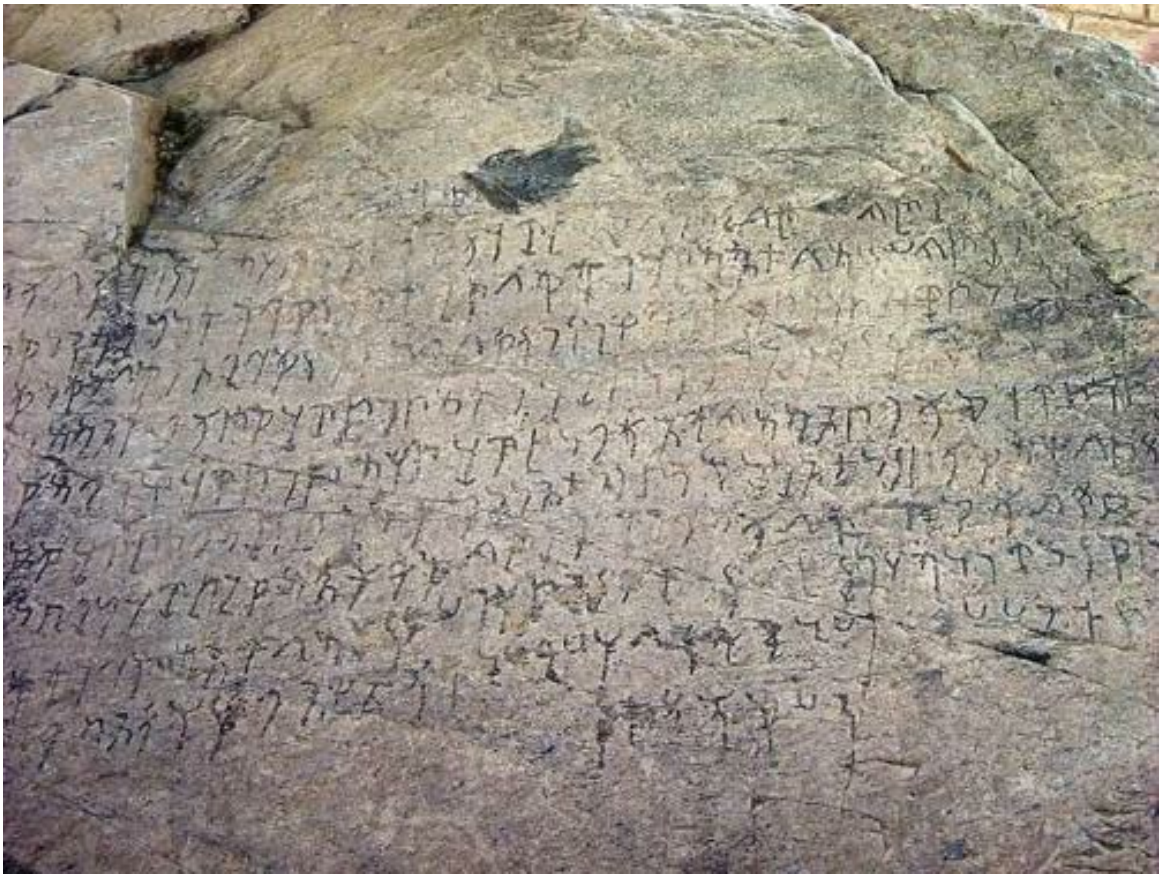
> Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: twelve years after my coronation I started to have Dhamma edicts written for the welfare and happiness of the people, and so that not transgressing them they might grow in the Dhamma. Thinking: "How can the welfare and happiness of the people be secured?" I give my attention to my relatives, to those dwelling far, so I can lead them to happiness and then I act accordingly. I do the same for all groups. I have honored all religions with various honors. But I consider it best to meet with

people personally.

Chronologically, the first inscription of Ashoka's was the bilingual (Greek and Aramaic) rock inscription in Kandahar (modern-day Afghanistan), upon which he professes his support of Buddhism and provides an impressive list of foreign destinations to which he sent envoys. This rock inscription was dated to have been written approximately ten years into his reign and two and a half years after the Kalinga War. Interestingly, the classical Greek inscription uses the word *Eusebeia* (piety) as the translation for *dhamma*, while the Aramaic word used is *Qsyt* (truth). The leaders and locales to which emissaries were sent are listed as Antiochus Theos, King of Syria and western Asia; Ptolemy Philadelphos, King of Egypt; Magas, King of Cyrene (Libya); Antigonos Gonatas, King of Macedonia; and Alexander, King of Epirus (Greece and Albania). Rock Edict V adds to the impressive list of nations above, as it included the Rashtrikas of the Maratha country (south and west India) and the Gandharas of the Peshawar frontier (Pakistan). The edicts were located as far west as Afghanistan and as far south as Andhra Pradesh (almost at the bottom reaches of the Maurya Empire), as well as north around Taxila. These artifacts describe the frontiers of the Mauryan Empire as being the territories of the Greeks (the northwestern trans-Indus Valley of the Seleucid Empire) and the Kambojas and the Gandharas (far northern tribes of the Indian subcontinent). The edicts accurately locate Greece as being 6,500 kilometers (about 4,400 miles) away from the center of Maurya.

Although the edicts of Ashoka are taken for granted today, they remained hidden after the fall of the Mauryan Empire until the 19th century, when British archaeologists, historians, and antiquarians made it their purpose to uncover and understand them. The edicts specifically were deciphered by James Prinsep (1799–1840) in 1837 CE. Prinsep was a British scholar, orientalist, philologist, archaeologist, and an official of the British East India Company. He uncovered a script at the Sanchi Stupa referring to Ashoka as "Beloved-of-the-Gods," a previously unknown reference. Credit also goes to British officers and administrators during Britain's colonial domination of India, as they noticed that the extent and proliferation of these edicts were of exceptional historical value. Over the next few decades, more artifacts that clearly belonged to the same time period were uncovered, but it was only in 1915 that an edict referring specifically to "Ashoka" was found. This was when historians could confirm that the entirety of Mauryan edicts belonged to Ashoka the Great. From Girnar (western Gujarat) to Kandahar (modern-day Afghanistan), from Sopara in the Deccan Plateau to Mysore in the south (Karnataka), the enormity and impact of Ashoka's reign could not be ignored. At last, the references made to a remarkable leader who had converted to Buddhism in ancient Buddhist texts and other scriptural documentation, such as the

Mahavamsa, the *Divyavadana*, and the *Ashokavadana*, could be confirmed as one ruler: Ashoka.



[7] A major rock edict from Shahbazgarhi, Pakistan. Two large rock edicts were cut into boulders in the Vale of Peshawar. The edicts represent some of the first writing in south Asia and are written from right to left in the Kharosthi script. The edicts speak of Ashoka's dhamma*, or "righteous law," and are located beside one of the ancient trade routes connecting Taxila in the southeast to the Valley of Peshawar (east of the Khyber Pass connecting Pakistan to Afghanistan) and other northern territories.*

The rock and minor edicts were created soon after Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga, and five of the thirteen discovered minor pillar edicts were completed in approximately the thirteenth year of Ashoka's reign. However, the remaining eight (or more) major pillar edicts are thought to have been created in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh years of his reign, and their inscriptions are considerably more detailed and extensive than any of the minor edicts. Ashoka referred to his own major pillars as *Dhamma thambha*, or "pillars of the Dharma," and they almost act as appendices to the shorter statements of the minor edicts. Standing between forty and fifty feet high (twelve to fifteen meters) and weighing up to fifty tons, the pillars were quarried at Chunar or Mathura in the northern part of India and west of Pataliputra as single stone monoliths. The pillars were dragged—sometimes hundreds of miles—to their locations to be erected. These monoliths were carefully

crafted in beautifully reflective polished stone and adorned with Buddhist and regal symbols and animals, and they were topped with stone capitals in a separate and often different piece of stone. Most of the tops (capitals) of the pillars are of animals sympathetic to the Buddhist belief system, and they were placed upon an inverted lotus flower—a poignant symbol of Buddhism. The lotus is usually topped by a lion, although elephants and a zebu (humped) bull in a standing or seated position have been found. (Ancient Chinese reports also state there were horse capitals.) The lion is a pervasive symbol of Buddhism since the Buddha was born into the Shakya or lion clan. The lion, of course, is also a symbol of leadership and royalty, and the animals were similarly carved from a single piece of stone.

The surviving capitals are some of India's most remarkable historical and artistic artifacts. Some of these exquisite sculptures form the basis of the Indian Republic's official regalia—specifically the wheel and the four outward-pointing lions. The edicts were inscribed on the pillars in local dialects so they could be understood by as many people as possible. Even though many of the pillars are broken, the condition of the pillars and capitals have survived centuries in the elements. There is confusion over exactly how many pillars there were, but up to twenty are thought to have survived, with seven still intact. The rock edicts are typically found where large flat rocks were available for inscriptions. The pillar edicts were placed to not only mark certain extents of the Mauryan Empire at a particular point in time but also to mark important Buddhist locations, such as Lumbini (Nepal), the birthplace of the Buddha. This pillar's inscription commemorates Ashoka's pilgrimage to that place. Other edicts were strategically placed in urban nodes or along busy highways in order to be read by as many people as possible.

Ashoka's architecture and edicts were created in the Hinayana Buddhist period (6th BCE to 1st century CE) in which there aren't representations of the Buddha but rather the symbols of Buddhism. The choice of a pillar as a structure is also noteworthy because, in both Buddhism and Hinduism, the pillar is thought to represent the axis (*axis mundi*) on which the world spins. Ashoka's edifices represent some of the first physical representations of the Buddhist religion. Ashoka's most famous pillar is at Sarnath (c. 250 BCE) in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Sarnath is a location of profound Buddhist spirituality. To this day, it remains a destination for Buddhist pilgrims, and in Ashoka's day, it was a place of monasteries (viharas) and learning. Sarnath is thought to be the location where the Buddha gave his first sermon and described the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism after he gained enlightenment. The Buddha was said to have attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya—a religious site in the northeastern Bihar state. An existing polished sandstone slab (the Vajrasana or "Diamond Throne") still exists under the ancient Bodhi Tree, which is thought to have been installed by

Ashoka at the place where the Buddha gained enlightenment. The empty throne is not meant to be occupied but rather serves as a *cetiya* ("holy relic") of where the Buddha once sat. The sandstone slab is decorated on its sides by flame palmettes, rosettes, lotuses, and geese, and geometric patterns were carved into the top. It is reminiscent of some of Ashoka's pillar capitals. Alongside the *Vajrasana* are the remnants of an ancient Buddhist temple, which has also been attributed to Ashoka. Bodh Gaya was known as Sambodhi ("Complete Enlightenment") in ancient times, and Ashoka is thought to have visited it in his tenth regnal year.

Ashoka invested heavily in the development of monuments and monasteries at Sarnath after his conversion, including a large meditation dome (stupa) called Dharmarajika Stupa, complete with a megalithic railing. Ashoka also installed a monolithic pillar topped with a lion capital. Ashoka's seven-foot-tall capital is divided into three sections. A Buddhist lotus forms the foundation of the capital, upon which rests a cylindrical abacus. Four animals represent the cardinal directions of the abacus: a horse, a lion, a bull, and an elephant. They are all separated by the wheel of *dhamma* (progress along the righteous path). The capital is topped by four powerful outward-pointing lions, which are also facing the cardinal directions; they symbolize courage, confidence, and pride. These lions are said to represent Ashoka's power over all the land. The capital has been used as India's official emblem since the 1950s and also appears on banknotes and coins. The pillar was inscribed in the Brahmi script and warned monks and nuns from causing divisions in the Sangha (Buddhist community). Sarnath is a profound example of the evolution of Buddhism in India over one and a half millennium and also provides a priceless historical heritage for the Mauryan age.

[8] Some of the surviving or reproduced edicts of Ashoka: The lion capitals (sculptural edifices topping the pillars); the Dharma Wheel (Ashoka Chakra); and pillars inscribed with his edicts.

Unfortunately, some of Ashoka's pillars are in pieces, with the capitals set aside in museums. In certain places, reconstructions now stand where the pillars once stood. Along with the edicts, Ashoka created Buddhist shrines, temples, and monasteries and sent missionaries to foreign lands. Much of the spread of Buddhism to Eastern countries is attributed to Ashoka's missionary work. Ashoka also abolished the caste

(social class) system and preached equality. More than 2,000 years later, many of the monuments still stand and give insight into the Mauryan story.

Ashoka's Pillar Edict II describes *dhamma* (right action), which consists of performing good deeds and practicing compassion, liberality, truthfulness, and purity. Overall, *dhamma* in the context in which Ashoka instituted it was essentially "good conduct" or "decent overall behavior." He also became a strict vegetarian and eventually converted the palace to vegetarianism while advocating for the prevention of cruelty to animals or unnecessary animal sacrifices. Through his edicts, Ashoka preached respect for elders, teachers, and parents, as well as tolerance and respect for all other religions. In an unprecedented move atypical of his era of conquest and domination, he spoke of the necessity of comfort and plenty for all living creatures within his dominions.

Ashoka is referred to in his edicts as "Devanampiya Piyadasi" ("Beloved-of-the-Gods" and "Gracious of Men"). The Buddhist texts, from which we get much of the information about his life, refer to him as a model of virtuous behavior. Ashoka stressed the emptiness of the Indian ritualistic way of life, which could be overly ceremonious and flamboyant. He urged the practice of *dhamma,* for he believed correct action in just the right amounts proved most beneficial in both this life and the next. Ashoka's Pillar Edict V describes how he regularly released prisoners from jail and introduced a fairer judicial system. He preached equality above all else—within humanity, in social status, throughout religious practices, and across cultures and regions. In contrast to the caste system that had been entrenched throughout India, and in spite of his lofty royal lineage and position, he encouraged generosity to the poor.

Ashoka conformed with the Buddha's advice from the *Anguttara Nikaya* (Buddhist discourses) in creating no harm and living in moderation. Ashoka desired that people be well versed in other's religions and practice kind treatment of one another. He promoted kindness, self-examination, truthfulness, gratitude, purity of heart, enthusiasm, loyalty, self-control, and the love of *dhamma*. Ashoka's practice of Buddhist *dhamma* sought to uphold a form of cosmic law and order on Earth. His edicts have a distinctly personal tone, unlike the typical official declarations of his day, and they provide insight into the character of this complex and fascinating man. His messages are sincere and simple but perhaps a little repetitive and condescending at times. Ashoka's edicts assure the populace that he thinks of them as his children and that their welfare is his foremost priority. He pledges to foreign lands that he has no intention of conquering them.

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing how successful Ashoka's edicts were. He is the first world leader attributed with instituting a national Buddhist polity and is heralded, even today, as an ideal to be followed. If the reforms were effective, it is

also uncertain how widely the new peaceful regime spread or how long it lasted. Ashoka's written wish was that his spiritual style of governance needed to be upheld by his successors, but he also states that this could not be done without significant effort. It was unlikely that any empire could have produced successors who'd have had the political will and commitment to follow through with his unique vision.

Certain scholars are not convinced that all of the pillar and rock edicts came from one Mauryan ruler since the same name is not used upon all of the messages. Ashoka's name only technically appears on the minor rock edicts, whereas "Piyadasi" or "Devanampiya Piyadasi" ("Beloved-of-the-Gods") appears on the major rock edicts and the major pillar edicts. This evidence may suggest that two different rulers were responsible for the edicts. The Piyadasi king only speaks of *dhamma*, while Ashoka refers specifically to Buddhism. The Piyadasi edicts are widespread, as they could be found up to and including the boundaries of the Seleucid Empire in the northwest, which represents the greatest extent Maurya ever achieved. However, the edicts specifically attributed to Ashoka are centered within mainland India. The two sets of inscriptions are also of vastly different quality, with the major edicts of the outer limits being far superior. There is also a possibility that Bindusara was responsible for the original set of edicts that extended farther, but this is still uncertain.

Ashoka's Buddhist edicts do provide solid evidence that he was a committed and practicing Buddhist, one who took the purity and authenticity of his faith seriously. Several of his rock edicts specify behaviors and teachings that would keep the Sangha (Buddhist community) learned and united. The Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition attributes Ashoka with expelling a huge number of false monks from Pataliputra and organizing the Third Buddhist Council. He goes on to compile an orthodox Buddhist text with the monk Moggaliputta-Tissa to prevent any future infiltration of falsity into the order. The irony in this situation is that the creation and infiltration of false monks may have been caused by Ashoka's widespread influence and perpetuation of Buddhism throughout Maurya. It was as if he was spreading a homogenous belief system but also needed to be the overlord of how that system was practiced within his realm.

There is documentation that Ashoka had at least four sons (Mahinda or Mahendra, Tivara or Tivala, Kunala, and Taluka) and two daughters (Sanghamitra or Sanghamitta and Charumati), some of whom became instrumental as Buddhist envoys on pilgrimages to the outer limits of his territories as well as into foreign lands. Legends say that he had two children with his most well-known wife Devi—Mahinda and Sanghamitra—and that these two children were the most influential in his Buddhist missions, even becoming Buddhist monks and nuns themselves in the sixth year of Ashoka's reign. Sanghamitra was sent as far as Sri Lanka, where tales

of her mission were recorded in the *Mahavamsa*. Indigenous traditions state that both siblings were requested by the Sri Lankan King Devanampiya Tissa to visit and spread Buddhism throughout his land. Devanampiya was said to have been a contemporary of Ashoka's. Rumor suggests that Sanghamitra planted a branch from the sacred Bodhi Tree in the ancient capital of Anuradhapura, where it is worshipped to this day. Sanghamitra was supposedly sent to Sri Lanka to establish an order of nuns, but legends tell that King Devanampiya Tissa was so taken with Buddhist ideals that he converted to Buddhism and then instituted it as the state religion, where it remains the primary religion today (70 percent of the population are practicing Buddhists).

Megasthenes wrote that polygamy was widely practiced amongst the royal classes of India at that time, and Ashoka was no exception, as there are five documented wives of Ashoka (Devi, Asandhimitra, Karuvaki, Tishyarakshita, and Padmavati), although these names cross traditions, meaning some might refer to the same person. For instance, Tishyarakshita may have been the royal name of Karuvaki. Karuvaki is the only queen of Ashoka's that he mentions in his inscriptions. He describes her, along with his son Tivara, on his pillar edict at Allahabad as making generous religious donations. Devi is not mentioned on official edicts, and legend suggests that she chose to remain at her birthplace close to the Buddhist center of Sanchi near Vidisha rather than move to Pataliputra. Other tales clarify that although she had two children by Ashoka, they never actually married but rather retained a close association through their belief in Buddhism.

Ashoka sent both written and oral messages abroad in support of Buddhism. These Buddhist missions, known as *Dhammayatras*, included five states of the Greek kings, the kingdoms of Cholas and Pandyas (southern India), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Suvarnabhumi (Burma), as well as parts of Southeast Asia and China. Ashoka is also thought to have sent emissaries as far as North Africa (Egypt and Libya). These international tours were not only important for spreading the idea of *dhamma* but were also important for cultural and trade relations. Ashoka also undertook his own pilgrimages to sites sacred to the Buddha and traveled his kingdom to ensure the construction of his edicts and to personally share the word of Buddhism. It is not known how Ashoka's missionaries were trained or prepared in undertaking the substantial (and dangerous) task of spreading Buddhism throughout the realm and farther afield. Naturally, they would have met with a myriad of other faiths as well as skeptics who would not be certain of this burgeoning religion of the Mauryan king. The Buddhist missionaries would have needed to prove their worth and provide some evidence of their superior qualities. The dispensation of Buddhism was not simply a didactic task, for the monks would have sought to create definitive and lasting Buddhist colonies, as many were probably away from home for a long

time or possibly forever.

Buddhist teachings, such as the *Mahavamsa*, describe the Buddhist emissaries (including Ashoka's son) using considerable supernatural powers to influence others. While the supernatural might be hard to believe, it is possible that the monks had developed talents that took their vassals by surprise and persuaded them to join the Buddhist community. However, in many cases, it is most likely that any conversions to Buddhism came about after long periods of teaching Buddhist law and other principles of moral behavior. Interestingly, according to the final ordinations recorded as per apocryphal evidence, more women converted to Buddhism than men. Since Ashoka is thought to have sent his daughter Sanghamitra (a practicing Buddhist nun) to dispense Buddhism as far as Sri Lanka, perhaps Ashoka sent Buddhist women along with the men on these noble missions in equal measure, thus ensuring the widespread and representative conversion of his populace.

It is unclear whether Ashoka organized the *Dhammayatras* himself or whether they were the effort of his senior Buddhist council. Sri Lankan Buddhist manuscripts suggest that Moggaliputta-Tissa organized missions on Ashoka's behalf in c. 250 BCE to the outer borders of the Mauryan lands. In Ashoka's eighteenth regnal year, nine missions are mentioned as having taken place. Each mission consisted of five monks headed by an elder and included destinations such as Kashmir, Gandhara, Mysore, western India, Sri Lanka, the Greek territories, the Himalayas, and possibly Southeast Asia (lower Burma and Thailand). The only evidence of pilgrimages from Ashoka's edicts was when he visited Lumbini (the birthplace of the Buddha in southern Nepal) and visited the Kanakamuni Stupa in the twentieth year of his reign. Although he invested in the enlargement of this stupa in the fourteenth year of his reign, he erected a pillar at the site to celebrate his visit in c. 249 BCE. However, his Rock Edict XIII explains that he won a "Dhamma Victory" by sending messengers far and wide. Scholars debate whether these were actually Buddhist missions and, more importantly, if the practice of *dhamma* and Buddhism were, in fact, the same thing. Archaeological evidence has been discovered that supports the Buddhist text descriptions of substantial missions, at least in part.

Beyond Ashoka the Great's ascetic work, he was also instrumental in developing infrastructure throughout Maurya. He commissioned roads and waterworks, which facilitated trade and human movement for economic and cultural development. Shade trees, wells, and inns were placed along the roads for weary travelers. Hospitals were established in poor villages, and water sources for the populace were secured through wells and canals. Medicines were provided for humans and animals alike, and medicinal herbs, fruits, and vegetables were grown within the empire or were imported. In keeping with his concept of equality, Ashoka had an open-door

rulership style that allowed anybody to approach him at any time with state issues and suggestions. He also personally conducted inspection tours of his realm with his district officers.

In a revolutionary move, Ashoka laid out some of the first vestiges of national environmental policy by protecting the wildlife and all living beings within his realm. Animal sacrifices were outlawed, and the hunting of only certain animals was allowed, with other animals being protected. Ashoka created wildlife preserves and other protected areas to conserve animals and forests. However, not all of his conservation efforts were altruistic. The *Arthashastra* gives an interesting account of the sanctification of elephants for the purposes of breeding and training war elephants, which were crucial to the Mauryan army and one of the main reasons why they enjoyed military success for generations. Chanakya's *Arthashastra* specifies that forests were of critical importance in this respect, as ready supplies of elephants should be kept in designated areas overseen by officials known as "Protectors of the Elephant Forests." This preservation was considered the easiest and cheapest way to capture and train elephants rather than pursuing them through the wild.

This extract from the *Arthashastra* describes some of the specifications for raising tame elephants:

> On the border of the forest, he [the Elephant Official] should establish a forest for elephants guarded by foresters. The Office of the Chief Elephant Forester should with the help of guards protect the elephants in any terrain. The slaying of an elephant is punishable by death.

Besides there being large tracts of protected forests, similar conservation zones were designated for lions and tigers for their skins, although this practice may have been discontinued after Ashoka's conversion. The "Protector of Animals" held off thieves and dangerous predators in other areas to make the woods safe for grazing cattle. The forest tribes (reminiscent of the Kalingas) were never entirely trusted by the Mauryan overlords. When certain forested areas were strategically or economically important, Mauryan officials would bribe or subjugate the border tribes in these areas to their will. The Mauryans employed some members of these tribes to guard borders and trap animals. Although these forested areas were technically part of the Mauryan Empire, they were never completely tamed by the Mauryan authorities, so these alternative methods of creating mutually beneficial relationships enabled Maurya to remain in control and guard their borders. Despite Ashoka's announcements after his conversion that animals were not to be killed, there is evidence that poaching continued. It is difficult to believe that Ashoka's sudden (and possibly wildly unrealistic) ideals for a ban on hunting could be upheld by the common people, even when he clarified his wish with the edicts.

Perhaps Ashoka's most lasting emblems of influence were the Buddhist stupas (meditation mounds). These surviving relics are sepulchral domes made of stone and decorated with Buddhist reliefs. It is not clear exactly what the stupas were used for except as commemorative places for the relics of the Buddhas and Buddhism. However, it is likely that they had a more functional purpose, such as a place of worship and prayer. The interior walls within the stupas have exposed patterns of the wheel of dharma (dharma chakra) and the swastika, which represents the cosmic dance around a fixed center and wards off evil. It is difficult to believe the historical legend in which Ashoka is credited with the creation of 84,000 stupas and viharas around Maurya or that he spread the Buddha's remains among them. What is evident is that he was responsible for building many of these structures throughout Maurya, which, at that time, stretched through most of modern-day India and sections of Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. Ashoka apparently chose urban nodes populated by 100,000 people or other noteworthy Buddhist sites. At least twelve substantial Buddhist stupas and viharas in India and Pakistan have been officially attributed to Ashoka.

[9] The Great Stupa (Mahastupa), Sanchi, India, was commissioned by Ashoka the Great. This is not the original stupa, as that would have been made from bricks and been about half the size and surrounded by monasteries in a complex. These stupa complexes evolved over time into what can be seen today, in which there are at least fifty monuments. The Great Stupa is thought to have been rebuilt by Agnimitra, the son of Pushyamitra, the first ruler of the Shunga dynasty who killed the last Mauryan emperor. The religiously intolerant Pushyamitra destroyed many Buddhist shrines and persecuted the monks, but his son attempted to rectify his misdeeds after

ascending the throne. The stupa gates were built by the Satavahana dynasty. The surrounding railing and gates are emblematic of stupa constructions.

Ashoka's reign took place about 200 years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), but one of the Buddha's suggestions had supposedly been that stupas be spread far and wide to provide ordinary people with abundant opportunities to connect to the divine through meditation, which Ashoka took to heart. The above picture of the famous stupa in Sanchi is not an original structure, but it provides an idea of the investment and dedication Ashoka must have had for his faith. Ashoka's most famous surviving stupas are located at Sanchi and Bharhut (both in Madhya Pradesh), Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda (in Andhra Pradesh), and Bodh Gaya (Bihar).

When Ashoka was about fifty-five years old (c. 249 BCE), he undertook his own pilgrimage of Buddha's holy sites, including Lumbini (the supposed birthplace of the Buddha). Other records suggest he took a number of tours during his reign, during which he visited important Buddhist sites, spread the concept of *dhamma*, and performed other social welfare duties. Ashoka's pilgrimages sometimes took years, and he traversed to the southern tip of India and also into foreign lands, such as modern-day Nepal and Greece. However, this may be speculation, as it is more likely that his tours remained within the confines of Maurya while he sent envoys farther afield. His last dated inscription is on Pillar Edict IV from his twenty-sixth regnal year. This would have been around ten years before he died. From then until the end of his life, the only sources of information regarding his history are the Buddhist texts. It was said that his primary queen, Asandhimitra, died during his twenty-ninth regnal year and was replaced three years later by the ascension of his wife Tishyarakshita (possibly the same person as Karuvaki). It is not clear how Ashoka ended his days, but folklore tells that he was extremely ill and was draining the state coffers to make donations to Buddhist priests and monasteries. When he was prevented from doing this, he began giving away his personal possessions to the Buddhist cause until he had nothing left. He died around the age of seventy-two in c. 232 BCE, and he was cremated.

Although the historical records cannot be considered entirely accurate, it is clear that whether saintly or cruel, Ashoka was a force to be reckoned with. It appears that if he set his mind to something, such as conquering previously independent territories or influencing the spirituality of the entire pan-Indian continent and beyond, he always met with success due to his sheer determination and single-mindedness. Although Buddhism is now considered one of the major world religions, it was only a few hundred years old when Ashoka reigned, and it was not established as a major belief system. Ashoka used Buddhism (whether intentionally or not) as more of a sociopolitical instrument than a true mechanism of conversion. As a leader, he was

not intent upon converting his people to Buddhism and is widely known to have practiced authentic religious tolerance, going so far as to decorate and donate cave temples to the Ajivikas (the Barabar Caves). Ashoka's support of Buddhism seems to have been more of a suggestion to his people. In this way, he acted as a facilitator for the faith, not a radical religious convertor or maniacal enforcer of a new pervasive religion. Buddhism was still developing, and at times, it seemed to carry more of an intellectual weight than a practical guidance system that could be easily implemented.

During the first nine years of his reign, Ashoka put his considerable energy into conquering new territory, consolidating what he had inherited, and applying the sovereign guidance of his forebears—whether this was a good idea or not. For the remaining twenty-seven years of his rulership, Ashoka the Great put this same considerable energy behind a new way of life in the form of Buddhism. Although the altruistic and non-violent principles of Buddhism were a remarkable and unexpected diversion from the warlike times in which he lived, it is also clear that Ashoka was using an overarching moral and spiritual doctrine to maintain a consolidated economic and political powerbase. After all, he did not give up his army or taxation system, nor did he undermine the thriving trading system that his forebears had promoted.

As an example of Ashoka's contradictory style of rulership, he retained the previously conquered state of Kalinga and did not recall the recorded 150,000 people who had been deported after the war. (Records do not clarify where they were sent or why, but perhaps they posed a threat to his rule.) Ashoka never disbanded his army during his reign, and it is probable that the army was continually used to subdue rebellions. Ashoka continued to rule, even after his advocacy for Buddhism, in accordance with the *Arthashastra*, which promulgated that a strong king must maintain control under any circumstances and by using any means. The *Arthashastra* suggests that a truly wise king will know what is best for all of his people and implement it accordingly. The evidence suggests that Ashoka was aware of these dichotomies but was helpless to retract his actions in Kalinga because it would have made him appear weak or even opened up Maurya to malicious foreign enemies. He strove from that point onward to become a better man and monarch, but at the end of the day, he was still the ruler of the empire and would go to any lengths to keep it that way.

Ashoka's ambitious nature was not reduced when he stopped his conquests, although he already controlled most of the subcontinent. Instead, he used Buddhism to reorganize society so that he could find order in the chaos that generations of warmongering had caused. Ashoka turned to piety, humility, and non-violence in the solace of his post-war years. He not only took it upon himself to foster and

preach the gentle ways of Buddhism but also sent emissaries, including his own children, to influence others in all corners of his realm. Ashoka's idealism was genuine, but he was also naïve in thinking that his successors would apply the same balance of power and piety in their rule. After his death, it was clear that his successors and even much of Maurya were not as committed to this new way of life as they may have pretended or visibly adhered to. Ashoka's extraordinary system began to crumble upon his death. He had installed a single, unified, and peaceful vision in a unique moment in history, but unfortunately, his example did not last. After his reign, the Mauryan Empire began to decline.

To close the chapter on Ashoka's history, here is a quotation from the ruler himself: "All men are my children. As for my own children I desire that they may be provided with all the welfare and happiness of this world and of the next, so do I desire for all men as well."

Chapter 7 – The Weakened Empire

From 232 to 185 BCE (about half a century), six more emperors ruled a shrinking Maurya. These men were Dasharatha (r. c. 232– 224 BCE), Samprati (r. c. 224– 215 BCE), Shalishuka (r. c. 215– 202 BCE), Devavarman (r. c. 202– 195 BCE), Shatadhanvan (r. c. 195– 187 BCE), and Brihadratha (r. c. 187– 185 BCE). All six remaining emperors were considered weak, and after Ashoka's death, the golden age of Maurya ended. Some historians believe Maurya was split into two hemispheres: the western and the eastern. Kunala, Ashoka's son, ruled the western half, and Dasharatha, Ashoka's grandson, ruled the eastern half, which went on to become the final remaining quadrant of the empire, mainly consisting of the greater Magadha kingdom. However, others believe that Ashoka's son Kunala was blinded by his stepmother and could not take over any of Maurya. Ashoka's eldest son Mahinda followed his father into Buddhism, supposedly becoming a Buddhist monk, so he could not rightfully take the throne. Tivara allegedly died before Ashoka, and for some reason, Ashoka's final son, Taluka, was also unable to ascend the throne. Thus, the Mauryan lineage was continued by Ashoka's grandson, Dasharatha.

Legends tell that Dasharatha lost many territories, some of which were regained by Kunala's son, Samprati, the ruler of Maurya after Dasharatha died. The other four rulers of Maurya consistently lost territory. They gave in to stronger territorial leaders such as Sophagasenus of the Hindu Kush and other growing independent states. The top-heavy Mauryan administration, with its micromanagement of the populace and over taxation, could never have lasted for long, especially considering how large the empire had been at its zenith.

Hindu priests intervened to reinstate the caste system, and Hinduism gradually crept back into the empire to replace the Jainism and Buddhism instituted by two of the longest-reigning Mauryan emperors. The Brahmins had lost power and money during Ashoka's installation of Buddhism. The equality of the social classes had limited their power, and Ashoka's dissolution of animal sacrifices meant the Hindu priests could not collect money for these rituals. Evidently, Ashoka's puritanical approach to rulership was not convenient for everybody in Maurya.

At the height of its power, Maurya built a strong market economy through public-private partnerships, taxes, and the collection of wartime plunder. Large private commercial corporations had existed before the rise of the Mauryan Empire, and the emperors wisely allowed them to continue, sometimes leveraging their output or skills for public-private endeavors. The stronger kings of Maurya administered and traded with natural resources, such as timber and salt, as well as manufactured and crafted goods, such as arms and boats. Farming constituted the main activity of the populace, which was taxed. Tradespeople were organized into guilds with executive

and judicial authority; these guilds also functioned as banks. The establishment of compulsory market nodes ensured the movement of people as well as goods throughout the Mauryan Empire. A sophisticated Mauryan national economy was built upon the taxes from all goods sold within the confines of the kingdom as well as abroad, and tolls were established on major byways and bridges.

Maurya developed its own coinage in silver, gold, bronze, and copper, but barter was also prevalent. Large capitals, such as Taxila, were permitted to print their own coins. The state tended to fix the price of goods and often intervened to inspect weights and measures. Money was lent on interest using promissory notes, and a single currency system was maintained from Chandragupta's reign, which was based upon Chanakya's *Arthashastra*. The caduceus (three vertical circles intersected with a line) was a monarchical symbol used during the Mauryan era and appears on some of the punch-marked coins. The caduceus may have been Ashoka's personal symbol.

[10] The single currency system (the Karshapana) of Maurya was instituted by Chandragupta Maurya. They used silver punch-marked coins with regional symbols such as elephants and wheels.

The mighty Ganges River and its tributaries carried ships that facilitated trade with the border territories of modern-day China, Sri Lanka, and the empire's main seaports. An ancient highway (the Uttarapatha) ran through the center of Maurya from the capital of Pataliputra to the Indus River in the west and was described by Megasthenes in the *Indika*. This east-west conduit was well sign-posted, patrolled, and occasionally marked by Ashoka's edicts. The Indian subcontinent was linked via extensive and established trade routes through the Indo-Greek kingdoms to the northwest as well as the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. India's main exports were silks, textiles, arms and weaponry, spices, and exotic foods. It is also likely that they traded in minerals, metals, and precious and semi-precious mined materials because Maurya was rich in natural resources. Maurya's investment in infrastructure had helped to increase productivity and economic activity to support this international trade.

Administratively, the emperor (or king) ruled unequivocally but with a board of

advisors, who counseled the ruler on matters such as governance, the treasury, and the military. However, the king had ultimate control over the military, executive, and judiciary branches, and he administered Maurya through provinces, each with its own ruling prince and royal court. Maurya's hierarchal civil bureaucracy is similar to modern-day national administrative systems. Evidence suggests that Maurya was highly administered—perhaps too much so—to support the king and keep him politically and economically on top. The people complained of provincial bureaucratic corruption and oppression, and they sometimes rebelled against the Mauryan officials in charge—such as at Taxila during Bindusara's reign. The emperor's control included an extensive spy network and the maintenance of a large army, even once the borders of Maurya were defined. The army continued to draw from the empire's revenue well after the third and final strong emperor, Ashoka, ceased to do battle. Maintaining the salaries and equipment necessary for an army, which was the next biggest sector after farming, without the army adding any further real value to the kingdom may have been one of the factors that led to Maurya's eventual demise.

Ashoka's focus on the spread of Buddhism through Maurya distracted him from military strategies in the northwestern and Greek territories, which grew stronger during his reign. He failed to implement methods that could repel invasions for generations to come. Although he had good relations with the Seleucid Empire along the northwestern border, there were other empires, such as the Greco-Bactrians, that later took advantage of a relatively demilitarized and fragmented India.

Ashoka's death was the catalyst for the weakening of the border states. Ashoka had been a very involved leader, even evangelizing or sending his children to do so at the far corners of his realm. Maurya had always been too big and complex for one man to rule alone. The integrated governance system and civil structures could only last so long without a more pervasive and integrated objective ruling council or some other system. In addition, the costs of maintaining and defending Maurya were far too high. The governance of this extraordinary kingdom was too unwieldy to be maintained, so local strongholds were established along the major trade routes by local rulers. Leaders of small fiefdoms began diverting money away from the central treasury. The future leaders of the Gupta Empire eventually arose out of these fiefdoms a few centuries later.

After Ashoka's death, quarrels over ascendancy arose, and some southern princes defected. This confusion and disorder encouraged invasions into sections of Maurya and the reassertion of several states to once again rule independently. Naturally, Kalinga was one of these. The kingdom that had experienced a huge setback at the beginning of Ashoka's rule once again rose up, doing so seven years after his death.

In 225 BCE, the Chedis (Chetis) were in charge of the Kalinga region, as the Mauryan ruler after Ashoka—Dasharatha—had failed to hold Kalinga. The third Chedi leader, Kharavela, would emerge sometime after the Chedis had achieved dominance. It is believed he was twenty-four when he became the king Kalinga, and he was intent on taking back the kingdom and restoring the pride of his people, who had been subjugated by Ashoka.

Kalinga includes the modern-day state of Odisha (and also some of Andhra Pradesh), whose capital is Bhubaneswar. Near the capital is a Buddhist complex named Udayagiri, which consists of rock-cut Jain temples and viharas. One such cave, the "Elephant Cave" (Hathigumpha), contains a detailed rock inscription of Kharavela's rule. Here, Kharavela credits himself with the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Kalinga during his fourteen-year-long rule. Attributed with regaining independence, fighting off the Greeks, and leading other expeditions and battles, he strangely remains enigmatic today, even though he was the only prominent leader of his time within the region. This royal eulogy attributes Kharavela with regaining the holy Jain idols taken during the Nanda and Mauryan dynasties (particularly after Ashoka's Kalinga War). It also attributes Kharavela, whose exact dates of rulership remain uncertain, with subjugating the rulers of the Shunga dynasty, which ruled after the Mauryan dynasty. He is clearly stated as attacking the Magadhan capital of Pataliputra and making the Shunga king bow at his feet.

Very little is written about the last six Mauryan emperors. Although Dasharatha ruled over a shrinking Maurya, he continued the religious and social policies of his grandfather, Ashoka. He was also the final Mauryan emperor to have contributed to India's edicts, at least according to epigraphical evidence. Since, for some reason (supposedly blindness), the heir presumptive after Ashoka, Kunala, was unable to reign over all of Maurya, the fragmentation of Maurya was imminent. It seems that even with the appointment of Dasharatha, some of the members of the Mauryan royal family set up their own fiefdoms, specifically in the outer regions farther away from the capital of Pataliputra. Classical records indicate that these independent rulers developed their own relationships and arrangements with the Greek world, such as Sophagasenus and Antiochos III in 206 BCE during the reign of Shalishuka. Dasharatha was considered militarily weak, and the more independent states in the south eventually broke away and formed their own sovereignty. According to Jain texts, the provinces of Saurashtra, Maharashtra, Andhra, and Mysore broke away from Maurya soon after Ashoka's death, but they may have been regained by Samprati, Dasharatha's successor.

The familial relationship between Dasharatha and Samprati is not clear. Some texts describe them as cousins coming from different sons of Ashoka. Some texts suggest that they were brothers from one father (most likely Kunala), while other texts

suggest that Samprati was actually Dasharatha's son. What is clear is that they were closely related members of the same imperial family. The ruler who followed Samprati, Shalishuka, ruled for about thirteen years and was also believed to have been an adherent of Jainism. The Puranas describe him as being "righteous of speech but unrighteous of action," and he was thought to be quarrelsome. Of the final three emperors—Devavarman, Shatadhanvan, and Brihadratha—virtually nothing is known except that they each reigned for about seven years.

Chapter 8 – Fall of the Mauryan Kingdom: The Shunga Coup

In 185 BCE, the last Mauryan emperor, Brihadratha, was killed by his own general (*Senapati*), Pushyamitra, while inspecting his troops. Pushyamitra went on to found the Shunga (Sunga) dynasty, although, by this stage, Maurya had shrunk to just three city-states—Pataliputra, Ayodhya, and Vidisha. Although the Mauryan Empire had been superbly administered by the first three Mauryan emperors, it was too large, and many regions were inaccessible for official information and governance systems to take hold indefinitely.

The destruction of Maurya had been imminent since the death of the great and beloved Ashoka two generations before. The six weaker Mauryan kings tried to hold onto the disintegrating empire, but their diminished rules allowed the emergence of independently controlled states with their own political ambitions. Ashoka's admirable proselytizing of a "one-size-fits-all" concept of *dhamma*, whereby those born in lowly positions could attain the same spiritual elevation through adherence to a strict moral code as those born in exalted social positions, may not have been as acceptable to those in power, as they most likely preferred a more hierarchical system in which they had more influence.

The Brahmin Shunga general Pushyamitra, who was said to have cold-bloodedly dispatched the final Mauryan emperor, was known to be religiously intolerant and has been accused of destroying Buddhist monasteries and stupas, including the Great Stupa in Sanchi. He reintroduced animal sacrifices and persecuted Buddhist monks as far as modern-day Pakistan, according to the 4th-century CE Buddhist manuscript *Divyavadana*. Pushyamitra was a strong supporter of orthodox Hinduism, but his son, Agnimitra, attempted to undo some of the damage created by his father when he ascended the throne. However, many historians do not believe that Buddhists were persecuted during the Shunga dynasty, or at least not after Pushyamitra's rule.

The Shunga dynasty continued to rule for over a century in the central Indian subcontinent, mostly around the Magadha region. The Shunga capital was Pataliputra, although Vidisha became a capital as well later on, which was located more in the center of the northern subcontinent. In 73 BCE, they were replaced by the Kanva dynasty.

The disintegration of Maurya left the subcontinent vulnerable along its northwestern borders, specifically the famous Khyber Pass (Pakistan/Afghanistan border), which had been used by conquerors over the centuries to annex India. Greco-Bactrian King Demetrius I (r. c. 200– 180 BCE), also known as Dharmamitra to the Indians, conquered parts of southern Afghanistan during his rule, as well as large sections of Pakistan and some of northwestern India, forming the Indo-Greek Kingdom. Numismatic evidence points to Demetrius having his capital at Taxila and

dominating the northwestern territories, while the Shunga dynasty occupied the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Unique coinage printed by the Indo-Greeks, supposedly around the time of the fall of the Mauryan Empire, points to the Greeks having a more than casual control of the border states in northern Gandhara.

Demetrius later sent two armies deep into India, apparently to complete the capture of the subcontinent where Alexander had failed. Demetrius was taking advantage of the confusion in the north after the collapse of the Mauryan Empire. Other sources suggest that the last emperor of Maurya, Brihadratha, married a daughter of Demetrius named Berenice and that the Greco-Bactrian king's invasion of northern India was to protect his Greek subjects who occupied the subcontinent. However, one of the most interesting historical suggestions is that Buddhism had flourished amongst the Indo-Greek rulers as a result of Ashoka's influence on Maurya and beyond. Some sources indicate that Demetrius invaded the subcontinent to show support for the vanquished Mauryan Empire and in response to the threat on Buddhism with the rise of the religiously intolerant Shunga ruler Pushyamitra. Regardless, it is likely that the motives were not entirely for conquest and economic and territorial gain. The Indo-Greeks retained their hold on the previous trans-Indus Mauryan territories for over a century and continued military forays into the continent. Finally, in approximately 70 BCE, Indo-Scythian (Syria/Iran) tribes overran the Greeks and settled in the trans-Indus valleys and the regions of Gujarat and Mathura (north and northwest subcontinent).

It is possible that the Greek armies got as far as the capital of Pataliputra, but they failed to invade India past that point, as they were pushed back to Mathura (north-central subcontinent). This invasion occurred several years after the fall of Maurya during the Shunga dynasty, but interestingly, Kharavela of Kalinga is credited with repelling the Indo-Greek invasion based on interpretations by historians from his rock edict at the Hathigumpha cave at Udayagiri. Kharavela seems to have been expedient and successful in extending his lands in all directions, and the Hathigumpha inscription suggests he attacked Magadha more than once. On one of these occasions (of which repelling Demetrius was probably the first), the edict reports that he recaptured the Jina—a sacred artifact of the Jain faith that had been taken in prior generations. There is a suggestion that the Kalingas never appreciated the installation of Buddhism by Ashoka, and Kharavela describes with pride how the Jina was brought back to Kalinga.

Kharavela and his family were also responsible for the establishment of Jain monuments and sacred complexes, such as Udayagiri and Khandagiri. There is evidence that he hosted Jain councils at the sacred caves and temples. After the twelfth year of his reign, Kharavela is thought to have become very devoted to the spiritual Jain life. It is interesting how so many of India's ancient rulers embraced

spirituality and asceticism after conquering large swathes of the continent, displacing people, and laying waste to generations. It seems they felt a divine prerogative to do both! This unusual attitude of using warfare to create peace and spiritual tolerance is confirmed by Kharavela's final inscription at the sacred Jain caves.

Kharavela's final installment on the Udayagiri hill stone inscription:

> He is the king of peace, of prosperity, of the monks and of the teaching. He is accomplished in extraordinary virtues, respects every sect and repairs all shrines. His armies cannot be vanquished and he protects the realm. He is descended from the family of the royal sage, Vasu.

Like the Jainist Chandragupta Maurya, Kharavela may have completely turned toward the ascetic life before he handed over power because there is no mention of him after he was thirty-eight. After Kharavela's son's rule, the Chedis are not mentioned again.

Controversially, Ashoka the Great is sometimes attributed with contributing to the downfall of the Mauryan Empire. His extraordinarily high ideals and expectations of unity and peace were admirable but unrealistic unless a leader of his unique stature had followed him. Although his *dhamma mahamattas* (*dhamma* ministers) were appointed and instructed to spread the concept of "rightness" through *dhamma*, they were rumored to have created their own power structure in certain instances and interfered with politics. Ashoka's edicts were an earnest attempt to solve the problems of a complex society, but in a sense, it is probable that he became overly focused on a single sector of government to the detriment of others. Although Maurya was incredibly wealthy, Ashoka was intent upon spreading Buddhism rather than developing international relations and trade routes for purely economic purposes. He was not as rigorous at collecting taxes as his forebears had been, and he would not resort to violent measures and bullying to fill the state coffers. To compound this oversight, he maintained an army that was not technically in use, invested heavily in spiritual monuments, and gave generously to Buddhist causes and individuals. Although well intentioned, this single-faceted style of rulership (which may have been compensating for his own personal issues with *dhamma* after the conquest of Kalinga) did not support the kind of heterogeneous powerbase that was required to keep a mega-culture like Maurya in existence. Ashoka's faith in future generations to uphold his altruism and belief systems was too high, and while his contribution to history is remarkable and admirable, he didn't focus on mechanisms and governance systems that may have kept order and peace after his death.

Ashoka's policy of an open, transparent, and approachable government that favored equality and peace over wealth and power struggles did not appeal to everybody.

His charity-centered approach was not conducive to the violent and rigorous methods that his ancestors (and even himself) had used to gain and retain Maurya. There may have been some relief when he died, and the previous might of Maurya could have been reestablished, but this was not to be. In an era of conquest and expanding dominions through violent battle, Ashoka was a paragon of his time, but his empire was also unlikely to exist far beyond his passing. This is an extract from one of his edicts that summarizes his altered and enduring attitude to the cessation of war:

> This inscription of Dhamma has been engraved so that any sons or great sons that I may have should not think of gaining new conquests, and in whatever victories they may gain should be satisfied with patience and light punishment. They should only consider conquest by Dhamma to be a true conquest, and delight in Dhamma should be their whole delight, for this is of value in both this world and the next.

Chapter 9 – The Remnants of Maurya

Although the accuracy and details of the Mauryan Empire remain obscure and contradictory, the Mauryan emperors and their feats have become legends in Indian history and remain a profound source of inspiration for their culture and governance. Jain records suggest that after his abdication, Chandragupta Maurya moved with a group of wandering Jain monks south to Karnataka, where he renounced his throne and gave up his worldly possessions. At Karnataka, he lived at Shravanabelagola as an ascetic for several years before taking his own life in ritual starvation (*sallekhana*). The hill upon which Chandragupta is said to have lived as a monk is known as Chandragiri Hill, upon which a monument—the Chandragupta basadi (a Jain temple)—stands, amongst other basadis.

[11] Chandragiri Hill Temple Complex at Shravanabelagola, Karnataka, is said to be the location of Chandragupta's last years as an ascetic Jain monk.

Jain legends state that a prominent monk named Acharya Bhadrabahu predicted a twelve-year drought and famine (which, according to scientific records, did occur) and journeyed south with a group of disciples, which included Chandragupta Maurya. Bhadrabahu was considered the last *Sruta Kevali* (an ascetic with complete knowledge of the Jain scriptures) and is attributed with writing the *Niryuktis*, *Samhitas*, and *Kalpa Sutra*. Shravanabelagola is more than 2,000 kilometers (around 1,240 miles) away from Pataliputra, and it is likely that there is some truth in the connection between the location of Chandragiri Hill, Jainism, and Chandragupta.

The fifth emperor of Maurya, Samprati (Ashoka's grandson), was also a Jain, and he is recorded as rectifying many of the misnomers of his predecessor, Dasharatha. Samprati, the son of Ashoka's blind son Kunala, seemed to have been influenced like his grandfather by monks, except they were Jain monks. Similar to his grandfather, Samprati sent Jain missionaries abroad to spread the belief system of Jainism and went so far as to disguise some of his soldiers as Jain monks to reconquer the Mauryan territory lost by his cousin, Dasharatha. Legends say that Samprati's grandmother, Padmavati (Ashoka's wife), was also a Jain. Once Samprati was fully converted, he is recorded as making inroads in converting a large tract of eastern India to Jainism. He continued his Jain missions throughout India and abroad. Samprati somehow ensured the safety of monks traveling to foreign lands and was purportedly responsible for building 125,000 Jain temples (Derasars) and establishing umpteen idols, some of which are still being found today, mostly across southern India. Ancient Jain literature refers to the piousness of Samprati and his many good deeds in support of the religion. Samprati's messengers, like his grandfather's envoys before him, were sent as far afield as Greece, Persia (Iran), and the Middle East. There are currently over four million Jains living in India.

Just north of Pataliputra, at the Barabar Hill Caves, are some of the oldest surviving carved caves in India. The four caves at Barabar (c. 250 BCE) are adjacent (1.6 kilometers—less than a mile—away) to the three Nagarjuni rock-cut chambers (c. 230 BCE). The Barabar chambers bear the name of "King Piyadasi" and date back to Ashoka's reign. Similarly, the Nagarjuni caves bear the name "Dasharatha Maurya," Ashoka's grandson. The sculptured arch of the Lomas Rishi Cave is the earliest example of the chaitya arch (horseshoe-shaped arch) and is also home to the first known Maurya relief, dating from Ashoka's reign. The caves were dedicated to the Ajivikas. The Ajivikas, a separate and atheist sect that no longer exists, had connections to both Buddhism and Jainism. Most of the caves at Barabar consist of two chambers with interesting echo effects. The caves are carved out of granite, and their internal surfaces have the well-known Mauryan polish with a dark, reflective surface.

[12] The entrance to Lomas Rishi Cave at Barabar Hills Caves, Bihar, India, dated to approximately 250 BCE.

Inscription on the Gopika Cave of the Nagarjuni Caves:

> The cave of Gopika, a refuge that will last as long as the sun and the moon, was dug by Devanampiya [Beloved-of-the-Gods] Dasharatha during his elevation to the throne, to make it an hermitage for the most pious Ajivikas.

With the mixing of cultures during the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, the Mauryan architectural style that was cast in sandstone looks distinctly more Persian (specifically the Achaemenid Empire) than Indian. Contemporary Roman writers who visited India described the Indian palaces as being superior to those of Persia, which was known to be exquisite and was also more documented. As an example, a pillar capital that was discovered from Ashoka's reign in Pataliputra clearly demonstrates the blending of Indo-Bactrian (northern Afghanistan or northern Hindu-Kush) and Indo-Parthian (Iranian) cultures with the Indian culture. Ashoka the Great is attributed with constructing architectural designs in stone rather than wood, possibly as a result of Alexander the Great's influence, who brought in Hellenistic stone architecture. Ashoka's monolithic pillars, which stand forty to fifty feet high, are polished, and foreigners visiting the land described them as "shining like mirrors." This is a particularly impressive example of Mauryan technological and artistic abilities. Most notably, however, Ashoka put most of his creative effort into the establishment of his edicts and holy sites, as well as into the development of the capital of Pataliputra. This development is evidenced by the surviving edicts (specifically the pillars), as well as the stupas and other Buddhist ruins throughout the Mauryan Empire.

[13] The capital (top) of a pillar from Pataliputra (the Mauryan capital city in Magadha—modern-day Patna in Bihar) from the time of Ashoka's reign in the 3rd century BCE. Evidence of a stone-pillared hall is also from this time.

For over 400 years after the death of Alexander, the northwest Indian subcontinent remained heavily influenced and sometimes occupied by the Greeks or their contemporaries. The rule of the Indo-Greeks continued from Alexander's time through the Seleucid Empire and into the 1st century CE. Thirty-six Indo-Greek rulers have been identified through coinage alone. The Indo-Greek rulers continued to send ambassadors into the courts of the Indian mainland, and a broad corridor of cross-cultures emerged across the north of the subcontinent and spread deeper into Greek territory. Indo-Greek coins depicting Hindu gods dating to the time of the fall of the Mauryan kingdom have been found in Afghanistan; they have been attributed to the Bactrian ruler King Agathocles.

The Greeks, and even the Romans who came after, were mesmerized by the exotic "land that lay over the river Indus." Some of the earliest Greek explorers were dispatched circa 600 BCE to explore the Indus River Valley and document their findings for the Western world. From that time onward, many writers, diplomats, and philosophers were dispatched to India, and although most of their writings have been lost, they were often paraphrased in other classical writings so their knowledge could be passed down through the years. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BCE) described the great wealth of India, saying that it was "the most populous nation in the world." It is no wonder that it was attractive, both as a place to be conquered and explored, by the Indo-Greeks. Alexander the Great was said to have been so enamored with a flock of peacocks on the banks of the Indus River that he threatened his troops into protecting them. He is thought to have returned home with more than 200 of the birds and distributed them far and wide to the wonder of

others.

Maurya existed during the era of Northern Black Polished Ware pottery (NBPW) (c. 700–200 BCE). This was a cultural period marked by several artisanal developments corresponding to significant increases in urbanization. Socioeconomically, this period naturally led to the emergence of India's first large, fortified cities, as well as rapid population growth and increased social stratification. Trade networks grew organically during the NBPW cultural period, specifically around specialized craft industries. Carved ivory, prepared semi-precious stones, diamonds, pearls, prepared cloths, iron-mongering, and forged tools all became part of an advancing basis for trade using specified weights and measures as well as standard currencies. The Black Polished Ware pottery was a form of burnished pottery with an exterior black luster, which was used by the upper classes. It was a luxury item, elegant and refined, and is evidence of the extraordinary craftsmanship of the era. The methods by which the black external polish was created are still not known. The discoveries of NBPW in central and northern India correspond to the spread of Ashoka's empire and simultaneously reflect the spread of Buddhism. The discovery of this Black Polished Ware creates a remarkably similar map of the extent of Maurya.

The Mauryan Empire also existed during a time when writing and epigraphy (written inscriptions) was burgeoning. These written artifacts have provided sources that give historians insight into this unique and astounding period in Indian history. Ashoka's edicts provide some of the earliest evidence of writing in India. Instead of the common Sanskrit, which was typical for the time, Ashoka used local dialects that could be understood by the common people, even using Greek and Aramaic in the northwestern regions. Ashoka's inscriptions are some of the oldest surviving writings in India, and his work began a tradition of epigraphical inscriptions in the subcontinent that lasted for millennia.

By comparing sources, it has been possible to piece together an approximately accurate chronology of the events and rules that defined Maurya. Along with the excavated archaeological evidence and Ashoka's edicts, indigenous literature, spiritual texts, and foreign writings provide sufficient evidence of a fascinating Mauryan lineage that reached an extraordinarily long and peaceful golden age during the thirty-six year-long rule of Ashoka the Great. In an era of constant warmongering and territorial expansion and domination, the reality that the Mauryan Empire held strong—and thrived—for almost a century and a half is remarkable.

Ashoka's *dhammavijaya* (spiritual conquests) supposedly extended far into other lands. Besides being instrumental in the spread of Buddhism to central Asia and North Africa, Ashoka is believed to have sent emissaries (possibly Buddhists) into

the northwestern Seleucid Empire and into the Hellenistic regions of the Mediterranean. With the assistance of the established trade routes—the precursors to the Silk Road—Buddhism eventually spread, giving rise to Greco-Buddhism. Under the Indo-Greeks, Buddhism flourished, and several of their emperors, such as Menander I, became famous adherents of the faith. The *Mahavamsa* refers to an emissary of Ashokan Buddhism—Dharmaraksita—as having been in charge of Greek (*Yavana*) Buddhist monks active in proselytism. The affiliation between these two cultures is evidenced in coinage, reliefs, and other art. However, it was the Kushan Empire (greater Afghanistan) that was principally responsible for the spread of Buddhism to the East, specifically China, in the Common Era, which was mostly spread through the influence of trade and the Silk Road.

Ashoka's influence in countries such as Egypt, Sri Lanka, Burma, Syria, Libya, Macedonia, and Greece resulted in Buddhist monasteries that may have been the inspiration for later Christian monasteries. Ashoka's extraordinarily high ideals and his efforts to build peace and proselytize (not only Buddhism but also essential humanity) laid a foundation for goodness that eventually spread through half the world. Although his ideals were not upheld for long in India, Ashoka's influence was widespread and lasting. Many of the current symbols of India and its national regalia—the wheel, the lions, and the peacock—are thought to have originated during, or at least been inspired by, the Mauryan period. The spoked wheel—or Ashoka Chakra—represents the wheel of *dhamma* set in motion by the Gautama Buddha (the endless cycle of birth and rebirth known as *samsara*) and is part of the flag of modern India. The seal of India contains the lions that appear on Ashoka's capitals.

Ashoka also instituted the revolutionary method of inscribing public messages on stones, which would last through the ages. It is likely that more perishable methods, such as messages on wood and cloth, would have existed as well, but they have disappeared in the sands of time. Ashoka was not only responsible for building schools and monasteries but also ensured the publication of Buddhist literature throughout his realm. Historical records by foreign travelers (such as the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang) indicate that there were far more pillars than have been discovered to date. The absence of major pillar edicts in the main centers of Pataliputra, Vidisha, Ujjain, and Taxila suggest that these have been lost or destroyed during urbanization. Ashoka's edicts united Maurya in a shared ethic of virtue during his peaceful and extraordinarily long rule. His principles of peace, brotherhood, and gentleness seemed to be more effective than the warmongering of his contemporaries. Since Ashoka continued to maintain such a strong hold on the Mauryan Empire despite his moral and spiritual promulgations, it can be said that he used religion as a political strategy. This great emperor achieved unification through

advising “right action” to his people and applied a live-and-let-live attitude while leading by example. He not only practiced what he preached but also toured his lands to spread his message.

The Mauryan Empire heralded a unique time when a multitude of religious and spiritual practices existed simultaneously to create a multifarious fabric of belief systems. Besides making a substantial attempt to create a national moral code and ensure the spiritual protection of his people, Ashoka was a vanguard in instituting socioeconomic reforms, providing necessary civil infrastructure, and preserving the natural environment and wildlife. He was so far ahead of his time that it is difficult to find a leader even in modern times who has achieved a similar status of altruism. Ashoka’s profound influence on India through his role as the longest-reigning Mauryan emperor was almost lost. His pillars lay broken and covered by sand, and his edicts ignored as unimportant, with grass and plants covering his stupas and monasteries—those that still stood at least. For almost 700 years since the end of the Middle Kingdom of India, Ashoka and the Mauryan Empire had been forgotten. Once uncovered, the legendary names that appeared in the Puranas and other religious works could, at last, be linked to archaeological evidence. As a ruler like no other, Ashoka was the only known leader of the ancient world who gave up warfare and conquest at the height of his power and instead preached communal understanding and harmony both in Maurya and abroad.

At its height, the Mauryan Empire consisted of most of southern Asia (or the entirety of the Indian subcontinent), and it remains to this day the largest single political entity of the subcontinent. During most of its 137-year existence, it was a thriving hub of industry, trade, agriculture, religion, and culture. The Mauryans created the Grand Trunk Road (Uttarapatha or the “Northern Road”), one of Asia’s most established and longest trade routes that linked the entirety of the northern subcontinent. Chandragupta Maurya is attributed with building this highway, which was in use for two and a half millennia. Although Chandragupta’s original road was about 2,600 kilometers (1,615 miles), successive empires continued to contribute to the road until it reached a length of almost 4,000 kilometers (almost 2,500 miles), running from modern-day Afghanistan in the west to the border of Myanmar in the east. Ashoka added improvements to the Uttarapatha in his time.

Although the Silk Road lay north of the Indian subcontinent and was only prevalent just after the death of Ashoka, Ashoka’s spread of Buddhism would have intersected and cross-pollinated along trade routes that joined the Silk Road to India. This intermingling of cultures and religions enabled the spread of Buddhism into Eastern and Southeast Asia. Ashoka’s work has been known to have increased the popularity of Buddhism in Afghanistan, Thailand, and northern Asia, including Siberia. Even countries that were not directly on the Silk Trade routes are known to

have been heavily influenced by the civilizations that connected the trade network, such as the Indian subcontinent—and the influence was reciprocal. From the 4th century CE onward, Asian pilgrims traveled along the Silk Road, as well as the Mauryan Northern Highway, in search of original Buddhist scriptures and to visit the holy Buddhist sites. Such pilgrims included the Chinese Buddhist translator and writer Fa-hsien, whose pilgrimage to India took place between 395 and 414 CE; the priest and scholar Xuanzang, who was also a Buddhist monk; and Hyecho, a student of esoteric Buddhism who traveled from Korea. Ashoka's lasting influence on Asian Buddhism cannot be dismissed, but it was done within the context of the Mauryan Empire as a whole. He could not have had the impact he had on the religion without being the Mauryan emperor, whose geopolitical reach, wealth, and infrastructure provided the platform he needed to gain traction in spreading his belief system. Also, Ashoka was not the only one who influenced a religious revival in Asia. Chandragupta's late adoption of Jainism led to religious reforms across south Asia, where Jainism is still practiced to this day.

The Mauryan Empire existed as a dichotomous kingdom. Potential oppressors feared their military might and the dominance they had over the untamed wildernesses of the vast geographical expanse of India. What is known about the most prominent Mauryan emperors is that they valued mighty warfare and conquest just as highly as spiritual sovereignty and religious asceticism (although not necessarily at the same time). The Western world was very aware of this contradiction, as Megasthenes described the Mauryans as "freedom-loving," but it was simultaneously evident that the Seleucid Empire was wise enough to maintain friendly relations rather than face the might of Maurya in an invasion. The remarkable historical figures of the Mauryan dynasty are known for their rampant ambition and absolute adherence to a sovereign form of government on their terms, for better or for worse. The visionary accomplishments of the first three Mauryan emperors and the infamous consort of the first two emperors—Chanakya—suggest that the ends might have justified the means. However, it was Ashoka's legendary epiphany that violence should not be the way but rather peaceful negotiation within the boundaries of military might and political domination that may have proved otherwise. For almost three decades after Ashoka renounced warfare, he ruled over a peaceful and fully intact Maurya. Perhaps his strategy of *dhamma* was the correct one to apply, but perhaps he was also just fortunate that his forebears had handed him a mighty conquered kingdom and all the resources to institute whatever policy he saw fit—peaceful or otherwise. The disintegration of Maurya during successive generations after Ashoka suggests that he led Maurya during its golden age and that no matter the policies he instituted, such a mega-culture was destined to eventually collapse.

Conclusion

The rise of Maurya saw the development of a pan-Indian empire that required allegiance to a central monarchy rather than the loyalties to kin and tribal regions that had been prevalent before. The title of an all-powerful king became a hereditary privilege. In an era that lacked an established, independent, and objective government, the strength of the empire depended upon the strength of the king. Maurya can attribute much of its longevity to its first three kings. Their reigns were long (stretching from approximately twenty-four to thirty-six years each), and they held or extended the limits of the empire, investing heavily in trade, infrastructure, and the people.

Chandragupta Maurya is heralded as a visionary leader and the founder of one of the greatest empires the world has ever known. He seized power at a pivotal point in India's history and was perfectly positioned to take advantage of the power vacuum that Alexander the Great had left in the northwestern subcontinent. Even more advantageous for him was the wide unpopularity of the Nanda Empire and the confusion and fragmentation that the withdrawal of the Macedonian troops had left.

The Mauryan Empire was one of the largest empires in world history. Along with the Gupta Empire, these unified kingdoms used consolidation as the basis for their political and economic strength. The first Mauryan emperors secured the borders of their realm through warfare and later by strategic diplomacy and even peaceful spirituality.

Similar to modern-day national systems, Maurya organized a central bureaucratic authority to govern and collect taxes. However, this centralized but all-pervasive government was not only a top-down hierarchy. The Mauryan Empire—particularly during the reign of Ashoka the Great—ensured ancient social security systems and support for the poorest and most marginalized members of the Mauryan population.

Maurya existed for almost one and a half centuries, and its emperors practiced religious tolerance, socioeconomic upliftment, and the development of arts and culture. This civilization reached its zenith during the extended rule of Ashoka the Great, who preached love for humankind, freedom from suffering, and even the prevention of cruelty to animals. Although Maurya was founded upon bloody warfare and political maneuvering, half a century into its existence, the kingdom had perhaps achieved the vision held by its founders, Chandragupta Maurya and his chief advisor Chanakya—that of an extensive and centrally controlled mega-culture.

Perhaps Maurya was only able to exist because of the groundwork Alexander had laid when he subjugated much of the northwestern stretches of the dominion. Perhaps the first three rulers of Maurya were simply lucky in their timing and positioning, and perhaps the intimidation of the Indian war elephant was simply too

much for the average battle-weary soldier to face. But a dynasty lasting almost 150 years is not established or continued on luck alone. The sheer geographical expansiveness of Maurya, as well as abundant evidence of sophisticated economic, trade, civil, and social systems, suggest it was an empire that knew exactly what it was doing and why. Much of the evidence, both archaeological and apocryphal, is contested, and while the overall Mauryan story is commonly accepted, it is likely that new discoveries will considerably alter its history as we currently understand it. We will never know the true intentions of some of the Mauryan emperors, but we can enjoy the historical gifts left by the Mauryan Empire, such as religious structures and official edicts, as well as sculptures, art, and the records of international relations and cross-border marriages. Maurya reaches across time as one of the largest and most intriguing empires of its era and suggests that there is so much more to be understood.

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